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HENRIK IBSEN

*UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME:*

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# HENRIK IBSEN

A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

R. ELLIS ROBERTS

LONDON

MARTIN SECKER

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*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

POEMS

A ROMAN PILGRIMAGE

SAMUEL ROGERS & HIS CIRCLE

Etc.

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TO MY BROTHER  
WILLIAM CORBETT ROBERTS

Whose library gave me  
my first introduction to  
Ibsen sixteen years ago.







*Henrik Ibsen.*  
*from a charcoal drawing by H. M. Radford.*

## NOTE

IN writing this study I have used Mr. Archer's definitive edition of Henrik Ibsen's works ; also the earlier editions of his versions issued by Walter Scott. I have also used the current Norwegian editions of separate plays, but have not seen the final collected issue. The translations from *Digte* and *Peer Gynt* are my own ; those from *Brand* and the Prose Plays are based on Mr. Garrett's version, and Mr. Archer's, but I have not scrupled to alter a phrase if I felt I could get closer to Ibsen's meaning and to English idiom ; the same confession must be made with regard to citations from Ibsen's letters, which are in the main taken from Miss Morison's edition. I need hardly say that, when I have altered, I have only done so after considerable thought ; I appreciate fully the enormous difficulty of translating Ibsen, and believe that in this work we shall only reach success by the continued efforts of different hands. The quotations at the beginning of the various chapters are all from Ibsen's letters or speeches. I have often disregarded their original context, but I hope

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they are sufficiently apposite for this to be forgiven.

I have read no critical books for this study, save Mr. Archer's invaluable introductions, Dr. Brandes' three essays, and Mr. Wicksteed's four lectures; I have purposely avoided consulting books that had at all the same purpose as this. I must here, however, acknowledge that I have been anticipated in one of my principal criticisms on the "Ibsenite" school by Sir A. Quiller-Couch, who in an essay on *Peer Gynt* insists far more ably than I on Ibsen's essential belief in self-sacrifice. I had not read Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's essay when I first wrote what I felt about Ibsen's view of salvation by love; but I am proud to find myself in agreement with so sane and acute a critic. The essay is to be found in the volume entitled "Adventures in Criticism."

R. E. R.

*January 26th, 1912.*



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# HENRIK IBSEN

## I

### BIOGRAPHICAL

*I have always loved stormy weather.* 1891

NOTHING is easier than bias except, for certain crooked and unsanguine temperaments, that indifference which deprives all judgments of value, and divorces interest from investigation, alienating altogether the passion from the search for truth. I believe that the main vice of our modern critical attitude may be attributed to one of these two faults, faults radical and essential, which I have stated. Either the critic of modern men and affairs, the appraiser of life, art and religion, treads easily in an eager advocacy of anything but the whole truth; or he treats the whole truth with a precision so indefatigably neat that it is inhuman in method and result. Instances jump to the memory. One recalls the passionate pleadings of Carlyle or Ruskin and contrasts them with

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the cold, judicial, if you like — but never judicious—use of the machinery of criticism by Spencer or, in a different realm, Professor Frazer. Criticism the world over, but particularly English criticism, speaks with the accent either of the bar or the bench—but it has been a bar whose rhetoric has dealt almost entirely with men and passions rather than with cases and general law, and a bench whose whole talent has been heavily directed towards theories and generalizations rather than towards human values and realities.

Now criticism has no kinship with the law; to treat any artist as a litigant is immediately to run the risk of making art herself not an atmosphere, an inspiration, an inevitable part of life so much as an acquired habit of living, a profession rather than a vocation. The compelling force that drives the artist, however humble, to express himself in words, in music, in paint, in stone, is just part of that huge scheme of Nature's which does not leave any man without some power of real self-expression and self-release.

It is here that one school of criticism makes its mistakes: it is separatist. After making necessary, though conventional divisions of art-forms, it tends to regard art only from within, to neglect the relation of art to life, without

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which all art becomes mischievous. So you find the man in the street, driven frantic by the false claims of specialism, frankly opposing poetry and practice, art and reality—and the end of the whole deplorable business is the growth of little, sterile art-games which make the decent man of his hands sicken at the word “Art.” But if it is true that Art, just as plowing, or priestcraft, or fighting, or love is really Life in motion, it is equally true that the artist wears his life with a difference. That this difference is just the fact that he writes a lyric instead of following a furrow is the thing which other critics will not realize: the critic, who borrows the accent of the advocate, ascribes to the artist motives that are not his, either as artist or as man; an extreme instance is the case of the critic who claimed Dante as a Puritan. In dealing with modern Art the critic generally acclaims anyone who deals in problems that stir his enthusiasm as an advocate for causes which the artist has noticed only as part of the make-up of his characters, or as implicit in the thought of his time.

The artist, if we take him as he ought to be, has two passions—he longs to relieve himself and he wants to express himself. There is a real difference here. The first process, the agony to get rid of what possesses him, to “cleanse his

bosom of much perilous stuff," is found in nearly every man: for art, I cannot say too often, is a thing entirely natural and human and inevitable, not a thing of the tea-table, the studio and the clique. But while all men long for this self-relieving, the man whom we call specifically artist has the longing more consciously than his fellows, and seeks his relief in any of those varied ways which we call artistic. Here comes in the second passion of the artist, the need for self-expression. Now the first passion concerns himself, this second concerns an audience—and no artist, not even FitzGerald the recluse, or Cézanne who, as his admirers tell us, left his pictures in the fields to astonish, not the bourgeois, but the cattle, can dispense with an audience. Most artists want appreciation, a few desire criticism, but all need attention. And it is the balance between the twin passions of self-relieving and self-expression that always marks the truly great artist. A man's art becomes more and more perfect as he learns more precisely how to give form to that fierce inspiration—the *μανία* of Plato—whose expulsion is his primary need.

It is easiest to show the significance of this by instances. Dante has a perfect correspondence between message and method, style and subject: in Michael Angelo, on the other hand,

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the subject gradually overcame his style, as may be seen in the final effort of his spirit, the fresco of the Last Judgment. Or to take two English artists: Blake in his later works and in practically all his paintings never achieved any satisfying union between his vision and his expression: Francis Thompson's least lyric or greatest ode is packed with the truth, the revelation that was assured to him; in his work as in the greater Dante, there is a harmony of will and power, only comparable to a perfect union of body and mind. What we must always remember is that for the true artist this harmony is the goal. No serious artist has ever listened to the overstrained clamour of the moralist, or to the shriller cries of those who dance around the unfertile altar of art divorced from ethics. It is precisely the artist who knows that the separation between Truth and Beauty is one of words, not of facts; that the schism lies not in the nature of things, but in the crooked will of misinterpreting man.

The man with whom this essay deals has, partly no doubt owing to certain faults in his work, too rarely been treated as an artist. I may, in spite of my resolutions, fail myself to keep clear the distinction between Ibsen and the Ibsenite, between the drama of Ibsen and the comedy of Ibsenism, but I would warn any who



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pick this book up that it is not a work on the marriage problem or on heredity or on women's rights, but an effort to state the position and to appraise the art of the greatest dramatist Europe has had since Shakespeare and Calderon, to give some estimate of the man whom posterity will regard as we do the great dramatists of Periclean Athens and Elizabethan London; of the dramatist whose work is as human as Shakespeare's, as certain as Congreve's, and as modern as Balzac's.

In re-reading Ibsen I noticed again and again how much our modern novelists and dramatists owe to him and his characters—novel after popular novel can be traced back to *A Doll's House*, to *Ghosts*, to *The Lady from the Sea*, to *Rosmersholm*, or to *Little Eyolf*: character after character has its prototype in Hedda Gabler, or in Hilda, or in Borkman, or in Tesman: and is not the nineteenth-century man, with his aspirations and failures, his determined effort to make the best of science and religion, to have his hands in the pockets of Mammon and his feet on the threshold of God's temple, to deal out justice while he sues for mercy, to sin in earnest and repent in jest, to live on the woman whom he patronizes and to toady to the God whom he denies—is not he drawn for all time in the pictures of Brand and Peer Gynt?



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Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20th, 1828. It was the year that also saw the birth of two of his greatest contemporaries in creative art, Leo Nikolaivitch Tolstoy and George Meredith. Meredith and Tolstoy both betray their nationalities, the sorrow of the steppes and the pride of great Russia were in the brain of the author of *War and Peace*; and in Meredith the conqueror Celt had almost equal sway with the conquered Saxon. It is worth noticing, perhaps, that while Tolstoy was Russian for generations, and Meredith, on one side Welsh and on the other English, Ibsen, in whose later work, at least, nationality never appears, was the descendant of a Dane, who migrated to Bergen in 1720: his son, Ibsen's great-grandfather, married a Scot, and Ibsen's grandmother and mother were of German origin. The cosmopolitanism of race, combined with his long residence in other countries than the Norway of his birth, no doubt helped in giving to his work that universal quality which has made his plays the property of every civilized stage.

As a boy, Ibsen had characteristics which can be found in many children who do not afterwards develop the promise of an imaginative childhood. He was a vivid dreamer; he occupied his spare time in building, and he loved to make little puppets of pasteboard and arrange

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them in tableaux. A passion for painting was allowed to die, owing to his father's lack of means, and when Ibsen was fifteen years old he was apprenticed to an apothecary in a provincial Norwegian town. I do not think we need suppose he was very discontented with this life; at any rate he was sufficiently touched by his environment to begin reading for his matriculation at Christiania University, intending to pursue the medical course. He was a youth who developed his talent slowly; poems that he wrote about the year 1848—inspired by various political upheavals—were evidently, from his own description, of little value; and his first play, *Catalina*, written when he was twenty-one, has purely an interest of curiosity.

In 1850 Ibsen was living at Christiania with a friend who admired his work and had paid for the publication of *Catalina*. They were in great poverty, and for two or three days in this dismal period they lived on Ibsen's first play, after selling the first edition as waste paper. A great advantage of his removal to the capital was that he met men who were his intellectual companions, Björnsterne Björnson and Jonas Lie and Vinje, a name not so familiar to English people. He dabbled in journalism and in political agitation, and wrote another play whose merits were entirely derivative.

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Hitherto his career bears a remarkable resemblance to that of almost any of the more prominent of our early romantics, Leigh Hunt, or Shelley, or Southey or Coleridge. But in 1850—the year of Wordsworth's death—an event occurred which definitely secured Ibsen for the stage. Ole Bull, a keen Norwegian and a great violinist, established at Bergen a national Norwegian Theatre and appointed Ibsen his first “theatre-poet.” This incident, with its momentous consequences, gives the lie yet again to the old fallacy that the great artist is quite independent of circumstances. The founding of the Bergen theatre may be counted as immediately responsible for the rise of Norwegian drama; just as, in our own time, we have seen the growth of an Irish drama simply due to the single-hearted enthusiasm of a few men and women and their belief that, given the opportunity, Ireland could produce plays.

For six years Ibsen maintained his connection with that theatre, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the value of the practical experience he gained: he was dramatic author and stage-manager, and his comparative failure in the latter capacity was no doubt as useful to him as his comparative success as a playwright. The plays he wrote for the Bergen theatre are of very varied merit. The first, *St. John's Night*,

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has never been printed and was a failure. The next year he revised and revived the play he wrote at Christiania, *The Warrior's Barrow*; and in 1855 he produced *Lady Inger of Östrät*, a work of very different calibre.

Its greater value is probably due to the fact that it was the fruit of a violent love-affair, which also inspired several lyrics. Ibsen was a young man of twenty-seven, and his friendship with Henrikke Holst was of the most romantic: there is no need to seek for Henrikke's features in the ladies of the play, or to be surprised that the apparent connection between his passion and his drama is so slight. It would be foolish to ask from the author of *Peer Gynt* and *John Gabriel Borkman* a close correspondence between actual facts and poetic realities; he is concerned with deeper truths, and he knew that his maiden-love was the cause of this new and greater power of achievement.

In 1855 Ibsen produced *The Feast of Solhaug*, a play with a certain moonlit beauty, but with no great claims to strength or originality; and the last play produced at Bergen, *Olaf Lieliekrans*, a work I have not read, is described by all critics as a weak effort in the same romantic manner. Shortly after the production of *The Feast of Solhaug* Ibsen met Susanna Daa Thoresen, whom two years afterwards he

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married. Only one child was born to them, Sigurd Ibsen, on December 23rd, 1859. The time has not come to estimate the exact influence which his marriage had on Ibsen: only a few documents about, or letters to, his wife have been published, and these disclose little except that he was as a young man obviously in love, and that in later life he was affectionately looked after by his wife. It would be rash, for instance, to draw any conclusions from the fact that *Love's Comedy* was written after three years of married life; for that cynical little play, according to the author himself, was approved of only by his wife. "Hers," he goes on to say, "is precisely the character which a man of intellect desires—she is illogical, but has strong poetic feelings, a broad and liberal mind, and a hatred almost passionate for all petty considerations." Ibsen also says in the same document—a letter written for biographical purposes in 1870—that he had the same model for Hiördis in *The Vikings at Helgeland* and for Svanbild in *Love's Comedy*. This, taken with the fact that he wrote *The Vikings* during his engagement, is the best key we have to the character of Susanna Ibsen. There seems little doubt that the character of his wife and her sister—who died in 1874—furnished Ibsen with those two types of women—the forceful, direct and rather ruthless and the



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strong, gentle, untiring and faithful—who recur so frequently in his plays. Doubtless, too, Ibsen's increased preoccupation with the more intimate relationships between men and women, a preoccupation present even in *Emperor and Galilean*, was fostered by Susanna and Marie Thoresen.

After his marriage Ibsen's financial position became serious. He left Bergen—where his salary had been £67 10s. a year—and returned to Christiania. The theatrical world at Christiania was just beginning to feel the growth of the Norwegian national movement; and a “Norwegian Theatre” was started in opposition to the Christiania Theatre which was conducted under Danish management. To this theatre Ibsen was appointed director at a salary of £135. This, although an improvement, was still but a poor income for a man with a wife and a son; and the bankruptcy of the theatre in 1862 made things more serious for the poet. In January 1863 Ibsen petitioned the Government for a grant of £90 a year. This was refused in March of that year, but in May Ibsen, emboldened by the fact that Björnson had been granted £90 in March, applied again, this time asking—was he measuring his achievements or his necessities against his colleague's?—for £160. His application was successful, although the Government, in acceding to it in September

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1863, reduced the salary, or travelling-pension, to the £90 originally asked for. With this Ibsen, in the spring of 1864, went to Rome, where he was to live for four years.

Small as this endowment may seem now to us, looking back on the work of Ibsen it must be admitted that the Government did well in thus giving their country's greatest genius the chance of development, the means for that change of circumstance and scene which made him able to realize and to visualize more acutely the beauty of the country he left, the character of its people, the colour of its scenery, the strength and weakness of its nature. The pictures of Norwegian life and country, in their breadth and their detail, with which *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* are crammed, have just that touch of surprised discovery, of awakened recognition which distance from a familiar object often gives to the creative artist ; absence, acting on the alert intellect, establishes an acuter memory, a keener vision than can be had, at least by critical natures, in the midst of known and loved surroundings. Under the sun and heat of Italy, through the haze of purple hills and green-brown Campagna, against the Alban hills and over the deep waters of the Mediterranean, Ibsen saw a mirage of his Norwegian home, and gave us those incomparable pictures, firm in

outline, vivid in their contrasted colouring, in which Brand and Agnes, Peer Gynt, Åse and Solveig live and agonize.

Two plays—of different value and nature—were published before Ibsen left Christiania, *Love's Comedy* and *The Pretenders*, and a long narrative poem *On the Heights*. In the biographical letter already quoted Ibsen wrote: "Not until I was married did more serious interests take hold of my life," but I think we should lay an emphasis on "take hold"; he cannot have thought that his marriage did more than encourage that vein in him which is conspicuous in parts of *Lady Inger* and of *The Vikings at Helgeland*. *Love's Comedy* brought the conventional people about its author's ears, and *The Pretenders*, written, as was afterwards *An Enemy of the People*, to express the mood aroused by his enemies' attacks, remains the finest and most magistral of his Norwegian historical plays.

When, with his pension, Ibsen left Scandinavia for Italy, it was not only his country that he left, but his country in a crisis which had exposed her national weakness. The poverty and pusillanimity of the help given to Denmark by her stronger neighbours filled the poet's heart with a fury that expressed itself with bitterness in poems and letters.



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So when Ibsen left for Italy he left in a berserk rage. He was no soldier, and yet all his life he was a poet of war, of strength, of defiance; all his life the fighter for the few, the singer of the man-against-odds, the foe of the big bully, the hater of that force, in states or individuals, which subdues by a vast, disgusting inertia. When in that summer of 1864 he tried to turn his attention to things of the past, to Italy, to Greece, to Rome, he found that at Rome or at Ariccia memory was stronger than vision, and instead of writing his *Julianus Apostata* he turned aside and, amid the cypresses, the myrtles, the olives, wrote that poem of ice and steel-grey mountains, *Brand*. Here in Rome, the Rome of the Papal States, "the only place that enjoys true liberty—freedom from the political liberty-tyranny," Ibsen could recall the slave-ridden state of his manhood, the false freedom of Norway; and at Ariccia he saw Skien more vividly than ever before. "Never have I seen the Home and its life so fully, so clearly, so closely as precisely from a distance and in absence," are his own words which explain in some sort the sculptured detail of his first great work.

With the publication of *Brand* in 1865 Ibsen takes his place, with Björnson, as the most considerable figure, both for promise and perform-

ance, in Norwegian literature. The success of the play did nothing to turn the poet's head: he knew that the people who applauded were forced to do it not so much because of the good in them as because of the manner in which his drama appealed to that good. He was still, in *Brand*, susceptible of being pushed into the traditional categories; he spoke not only of religion, but of theology, not merely of God, but of priests; and while no doubt some saw in *Brand* at any rate a degree of the sheer ideal force of the poem, for the majority its appeal was along lines that we can only parallel in England by the astounding success of such a book as *Robert Elsmere*. *Brand* has just enough of the tone of the pulpit to win for it that enthusiastic recognition which congregations give to a popular preacher, even when he castigates them for their meaner offences. But Ibsen gave no encouragement to his followers; never has a great man less deserved the curse of greatness, parasites. His next book, and his greatest, is in entire contrast to the grave form, the splendid and sombre lines of his tragedy. He broke upon his growing reputation with the publication of *Peer Gynt*.

It is very easy for us to-day to see how *Peer Gynt* correlates *Brand*; it is even easier to see how much finer this great, loose, apparently formless poem is. Here in the cant of to-day

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was true “expressionist” art; there is no mood, no thought of Man the vagrant that is not rendered in *Peer Gynt*. It is the largest, the most unrivalled thing in drama since Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. But it was too much for the critics. Brandes, although he admitted that he found a depth of thought and a richness of poetry unmatched in Ibsen’s previous work, found some of it incomprehensible, and more of it witless, and accuses Ibsen of allowing allegory—of which there is none at all in the play—to sap the power of the poetry. And as if this were not enough, Brandes finds the basis of the play to be “contempt for humanity and self-hatred,” this the basis of the drama that contains Solveig’s immortal retort :

“In my faith, in my hope, in my love wert thou!”

*Peer Gynt* was published in 1867. In May 1868 Ibsen left Rome. While he was there he had never quite dismissed from his mind the fascinating, tired figure of Julian called Apostate. He had begun a poem—so he wrote to Björnson in 1864—on the Emperor; but this was never finished; and the great play he finally wrote was probably not begun even when he left Rome. He went to Munich by way of Florence and Southern Bavaria, and then in the autumn went on to Dresden. Here

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the sight of northern things and people drove from his mind the friend of Gregory and the rival of Libanius ; and his reconstruction of the death-struggles of philosophic paganism had to wait while he carefully proceeded to destroy the sham "liberalism" of his native country. *The League of Youth*, issued in 1869, is an entertaining play ; it is light, ironic, and achieves the topical success aimed at. It does more than this, it contains for always good satiric material against those who insist upon confusing party with patriotism, God with the "godly," and it should still be serviceable for those who desire to show what dangers lurk in the uncontrolled adoption of the party system. The issue of the play had the odd effect of making his fellow-countrymen rank Ibsen with the Conservatives, a mistake only remedied when twelve years later he published *Ghosts*. No doubt he was claimed for one party because the other abused him ; and the fact that, apparently unconsciously, he had parodied certain of Björnson's peculiarities in his picture of Stensgård added to his sin in the eyes of the political liberals. Björnson himself took offence, much to Ibsen's grief ; the opposition of the rest gratified and encouraged him, as opposition was always to do.

Two years later, still resident at Dresden, Ibsen issued a collection of his Poems ; and in

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1873 the long labour with Julian was over, and his last great romantic achievement—romantic, that is, in method, for Ibsen is never really romantic in thought—was issued. Into *Emperor and Galilean* Ibsen put far more of his conviction and beliefs than into any other play; far more, that is, of his deliberately held conviction. Often afterwards he echoes its ideas, particularly the idea of a Third Kingdom, the kingdom that Montanus the charlatan proclaimed and Joachim the dreamer predicted, the Kingdom of the Spirit, that was to see the great reconciliation when “What is, is not and what is not, is.”<sup>1</sup>

After the publication of *Emperor and Galilean*—it is worth mentioning here that it was the first play of Ibsen’s to be translated into English by Miss Catherine Ray in 1876, four years after the issue of Mr. Gosse’s article on Ibsen in *The Spectator*—the poet took an unwonted rest from composition. In 1874 he revisited, after an absence of ten years, the country which had now hailed him as a great poet: his plays were being more and more acted. In a letter of August 1873 he talks of “re-writing *Lady*

<sup>1</sup> Did Ibsen borrow this phrase of Maximus from the apocryphal word of Our Lord, reported by Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata*? “When what is, is not; when that which is without is as that which is within; the male with the female, neither male nor female.” It seems likely; but it is curious that Maximus should omit the more arresting sentences—his phrase is but the porch of the temple.



*Inger*"; he corresponded with Grieg over the music for *Peer Gynt*, which was staged, in an acting version, in 1876. In 1875 he revised his early work *Catalina*; but it is not till the close of that year that he can write to Hegel, his publisher, that he has finished the first act of his new play. This new play was, however, still to take some time, and *The Pillars of Society* was not issued till the autumn of 1877. *The Pillars of Society* was a great theatrical success, and Ibsen from this time, no doubt with occasional regrets, devoted himself to prose drama. His exterior life remained uneventful. He had left Dresden in 1875 for Munich; thence he took a year's holiday in Rome from the autumn of 1878, and he only returned to Munich to find he could not desert Italy, could not forsake Rome, even though, since the capture of the Papal States, the great city was now "taken away from human beings and given to the politicians." After little more than six months at Munich he returned to the city where he had begun *A Doll's House*. For that play, in the popular mind more associated with its author's name than any other, was written, partly at Rome, and partly at Amalfi, in his holiday of 1879. Ibsen was keenly sensitive to place, and if we would get the utmost feeling out of his plays we must remember how large a part was

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played by fortunate or unfortunate position and circumstances in contributing to the wonderful "atmosphere" of the dramas. The real gaiety of *A Doll's House* owes not a little, I believe, to the inspirations which made its author write in Italy rather than in Bavaria: Nora has the true lightness of Asti, while she might—who knows?—have had the darker and dingier hue of the famous Munich breweries.

Two years after *A Doll's House*, Ibsen published *Ghosts*. It was written at Sorrento, where he had written *Peer Gynt*, and it suffered from equal misinterpretations. But *Peer Gynt* was poetic, wilful, fantastic; *Ghosts* was hard, "prosaic," clear. Its meaning was evident, so thought its enemies; it preached Nihilism, atheism (not yet was Ibsenism invented), it was godless, obscene, disgusting. The reconciled Björnson declared it was Ibsen's noblest deed; Georg Brandes hailed it as "an imperishable glory," and Ibsen himself, in a private letter, modestly admitted that "he thought the time had come to move a few boundary posts." He moved them so effectually that for more than a year the play was unacted, and in England it shares with *The Cenci*, *Monna Vanna*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* the honour of the Censor's ban. What Ibsen thought of his opponents he told in a fairly plain dramatic

allegory, published the next year, *An Enemy of the People*. The note of this play, "the minority is always right," had been stated by Ibsen ten years before in a private letter, when he calls it "his fundamental principle in every range and domain," and says there is no fear that he will ever have to surrender it. Nor did he, for, as he wrote to Brandes, "at the point where I stood when I wrote each of my books there now stands a fairly compact multitude; but I myself am there no longer, I am elsewhere, and, I hope, further ahead."

From this time until the publication of *John Gabriel Borkman* Ibsen produced a play every two years with a regularity that nothing was allowed to interrupt. His external life has nothing of particular interest: all in it—such as his friendship for the girl who was model for Hilda Wangel—that was of importance found its way, quintessenced, into the plays. No doubt had there been a Boswell, Ibsen's life might prove to be to the full as rich in incident, material and spiritual, as that of any man of his time; but the few "intimate" books there are, the Correspondence, Paulsen's *Samliv med Ibsen*, Jaeger's *Life*, reveal but little except those personal traits whose significance to the reader is largely dependent on previous knowledge of the hero's character. That Ibsen was



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secretive in his methods of work ; that he sewed his own buttons on (and did the work badly) ; that he advised Paulsen to black his own boots and lay his own fires ; that he ordered Emilie Bardach (Hilda's prototype) to stop corresponding with him—all this gossip depends for its value largely on the character of the relaters, still more on the character we assign to Henrik Ibsen.

The joyous defiance of *The Enemy of the People* was followed by the poetic cynicism of *The Wild Duck*, planned and begun at Rome and finished at Gossensass, in the Tyrol, in September 1884. It is noteworthy as the play in which Ibsen allows the poet in him to conquer again ; poetry is never absent—not even, I think, from *The Pillars of Society*—but from now Ibsen has effected a reconciliation between the diamond hardness of his method and the strong poetry of his message : he achieves in *The Wild Duck* a new thing, an effect which Mr. Archer (writing of other plays) has very happily compared to Hawthorne's, but which excels Hawthorne by its sheer reality, its incomparable insistence on the inevitable rightness of the spiritual, of its appearance in such unlikely guises as Gina or Relling.

In April 1885 Ibsen writes to his publisher that he is following “political events in Denmark with eager interest” ; in the summer of

that year he visited Norway and was left with the impression that the country "was inhabited not by two million human beings, but by two million cats and dogs." We get the result of his gloomy forebodings of the political life of Norway in *Rosmersholm*, which he wrote at Munich in the year 1886, and published at the end of November. We may notice the depressing effect that a near vision of Norwegian politics always gave Ibsen; *Rosmersholm* is full, not of the sturdy defiance of earlier plays and poems, but of a heavy melancholy which, while it does not obscure, certainly softens the outlines of the poet's own steadfast and lofty ideals.

His next play is of a very different type. It is, with the exception of *The Master Builder*, the most beautiful of the prose dramas. Inspired by the longing for the sea, which is so often characteristic of those who have the blood of sea-folk in their veins and recollections of the sea about their youth, *The Lady from the Sea* is the most winning, the most gracious of Ibsen's later plays. It is not false to nature, it has plenty of salt to its sentiment, and humour to its humanity, but in the tender and exquisite picture of Ellida Ibsen has given us a portrait of a woman which even he, in his splendid gallery, never bettered. Ellida might be Solveig analysed—but analysed with how loving a touch,

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how unerring a kindness ; it is as if a great surgeon were operating on a woman he loved, and sheer love, we feel, as well as consummate skill compels the success of the operation.

The next play, *Hedda Gabler*, illustrates once more Ibsen's tendency to revolt. Grant Allen said, "Hedda is nothing more nor less than the girl we take down to dinner in London nineteen times out of twenty," and the feelings of an average man for his partner at a dinner party are generally neither deep nor particularly true. *Hedda Gabler*, with its disgusting Judge Brack and its incompetent Tesman, is only saved from complete hardness by Thea Elvsted, whose character, according to Dr. Julius Elias, was borrowed, like Hilda Wangel's, from Emilie Bardach. This girl of seventeen, whom Ibsen met at Gossensass in the summer of 1889, certainly had her influence on the poet of sixty-one. Ibsen's letters to her have been published. "He cannot repress his summer memories"; he cannot work at *Hedda*, because across his vision comes his summer experience demanding poetical expression—demanding, no doubt, its castle in the air. If Hilda Wangel is at all a true picture of Emilie Bardach I do not think that we need feel that either Ibsen or his "model" suffered at all from the friendship. Dr. Elias was told by Ibsen that his young Viennese friend "did not

care a bit about marrying a well-brought-up young man. What tempted and charmed her was luring other people's husbands." She would have made him "her booty"; but "she did not get hold of me, I got hold of her—for my play." With all this, Ibsen thought Emilie Bardach "had a great deal of heart and womanly understanding." I think it is possible to take this too seriously. A girl of seventeen would naturally be flattered at being allowed to chatter to one of the masters of the world's literature, and there is no reason to suppose that Ibsen deceived her any more than she deceived him. After all Ibsen felt that he had escaped, and his model—well, did she not get the most beautiful castle ever given to woman, that incomparable play, *Bygmester Solness—The Master Builder*? The episode is of great interest because it had this effect on the dramatist: from that summer in Gossensass every play he wrote deals with the problem, foreshadowed in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, of the relation between love and the world, between life and art, between woman and man. In *The Master Builder* woman is triumphant. In *Little Eyolf* man and woman is each baffled, and only the eyes of the dead child mirror the victory missed. In *John Gabriel Borkman* the woman is wasted and the man is broken. In *When We Dead Awaken* the

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woman is used, used successfully and beautifully; but the man spoils his success, and Ibsen only achieves a solution, if solution it be, by bringing to the aid of the deserted woman and the disillusioned man the tremendous forces of Nature and God. So Emilie Bardach had her kingdom: she deserves to be gratefully remembered by all lovers of poetry in that she, so far as we know, drove the great dramatist back to deal more exclusively with the problem that he, more than any other, understood and could present in the characters of his creating.

There is really nothing to tell of the last years of Ibsen's life except that, until his final illness, his forces show no signs of diminution; for I cannot agree with the opinion that puts his last play in a definitely inferior position to his other work. He left Munich in 1891, and *The Master Builder* was written at Christiania, where the poet was to live for the rest of his life. His return to Scandinavia—but not, as he had hoped, to the sea—may in part be responsible for the increasing gloom of his three final plays. In them the “younger generation” is either hard and unlovely, or broken-winged and futile: the older generation is, with the exception of Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*, not only baffled but bitter. When Ibsen said good-bye



to Emilie Bardach at Gossensass, he gave her a photograph on which he wrote "An die Maisonne eines Septemberlebens,"—"To the May-sunshine of a September life." That September life may be said to have passed rapidly indeed to December. Autumn, it is true, lingers in *Little Eyolf*; but in *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken* the snow in which each of them ends is a fitting symbol of the wintry atmosphere of the plays.

*Little Eyolf* was issued at Copenhagen in the December of 1894; in 1896 came *John Gabriel Borkman*, which in strength of method is equal to all but the greatest of the previous plays; and three years later was issued *When We Dead Awaken*, a dramatic epilogue which concluded the series that began with *The Master Builder*. It was also to conclude its author's dramatic work. Although in March 1900 he could still look forward to writing another play "with new weapons and in new armour," his hope was never to be fulfilled. With the new century Ibsen's fatal illness began, and on May 24th, 1906, he died.

Byron, writing from Ravenna to Thomas Moore, tells him that a certain Mr. Coolidge, an American, had called on him, and that he liked his visitor. "I expect," the poet goes on, "he did not

take quite so much to me, from his having expected to meet a misanthropical gentleman, in wolf-skin breeches, and conversing in fierce monosyllables, instead of a man of this world. I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of *excited passion*, and that there is no such a thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides who could ever *shave* themselves in such a state?"

The world, particularly that small part of it which jackals men of genius, is still prone to forget that the poet is not always in a passion. It is true that some bad poets have lent themselves to the delusion by adopting in their appearance and manner a sombre dignity quite unsuspected from their works. This, if it occurs in good poets, is but a fault of youth; and no great poet ever professed to act as well as to write his more passionate works. Certainly to "the overstrained women" (as Mrs. Ibsen called them) who wrote to the author of *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen must have proved as disconcerting an idol as was Robert Browning to his more foolish admirers. Ibsen as a young man had a reputation as a Bohemian, but his connections with "non-reputable" life, political or social, were never, I fancy, very many or very serious. The prospect of imprisonment in 1851,

when he was concerned with the Norwegian working-men's movement (or rather with its leaders) alarmed him considerably, and his subsequent sympathy for the movement did not take the shape of sharing the risks attendant on its prosecution. Nor do I say he was wrong. He knew that his real work lay far apart from parties and party-conflict; and we ought, I think, to give him praise for going so far as he did in sharing his friends' plans rather than blame him for not pursuing a course of action quite unnatural to him, the arch-individualist and aristocrat.

After the publication of *Brand* Ibsen, always aristocratic at heart, became aristocratic in appearance; Mr. Archer says he looked like a distinguished diplomat. His real affection for "honours," eagles, and stars, and crosses, testifies to this same strain in his temperament; he belonged really to that age of the arts when the artist, merely because of his art, is given a share in the government or the direction of affairs. It is in *Rosmersholm* we have our clearest view of Ibsen's political views, and Rosmer with his scheme for "ennobling" is really a Platonist, echoing Plato's demand that the philosopher should rule, echoing Plato's claim that the man who thinks best does best.

Beneath this correct, diplomatic, reserved ex-



terior what kind of a character was there? It is difficult to say. The materials are unsatisfactory, scanty and at times contradictory. But there are certain traits that stand out unmistakably.

First, there is Ibsen's astounding tendency to complete self-sufficiency. He knew it as a danger, and it was balanced in him—as we can see from the account of his wife already quoted—by his passionate interest in his fellow-creatures and his real capacity for affection. Still, in spite of the defensive letter written to his uncle, Ibsen's relations towards his family must be counted as a weakness in him. He deliberately cut himself off. It is true he had to earn his own living from the age of fifteen, but this, though perhaps the fault of his father, was certainly not the desire of his parents. It was inevitable that Ibsen should leave his home; but there was no need surely that the breach—he wrote no letters to his family except to his married sister Hedwig—should have been so complete as it was. Evidently Ibsen had his misgivings; when he writes to Christian Paus, his uncle, on the news of his father's death, he explains that he did not write to his parents because he could send them no money; "it seemed to me idle to write when I could not act." Never, surely, did anyone make a lamer apology for neglecting the claims

of affection ; it would be better to say nothing than to say this.

This harshness never quite deserted Ibsen ; but it certainly lessened as he revised his philosophy and saw more clearly that where he had put duty he must put love ; that the demands of love are really not external at all, but merely one form of the manifestation of spiritual life. Against this egotism, too, we must put that side of his character which is evidenced by his marriage, by his subsequent relation to his wife and his sister-in-law, and by his capacity for forming new friendships, of which the best example we have is the episode with Emilie. It is not, perhaps, fantastic to say that these two sides of his character have their parallel in his work. In its consummate form, its absolute rightness, its sureness of method we have the man who knew exactly what he wanted, and was bound to get it in spite of everything ; the man who was possessed with such full-blooded "egoism" that it "forced him for a time to regard what concerned himself as the only thing of any consequence, and everything else as non-existent" : while in the lover and husband and friend we can see the artist who, almost in spite of himself, adds to the beauty of form, the beauty of colour and shadow, and finally lets the creatures of his will have their share, in their symbol and sugges-

tion, in building plays that are not only consummate dramas but lyrical poems of the most poignant appeal.

It was the mystic and poet in Ibsen that kept him from allying himself with parties and sects and movements. It is astonishing how clear he is from all the nineteenth-century cant—the cant of rationalism, the cant of convention, the cant of liberty, the cant of commercial and political prosperity. His poetry and his humour are effective solvents of all the “intellectual” rubbish from which the Scandinavian liberal movement suffered. Here his letters to Brandes are the most informing documents. He argues against Brandes’ belief in political liberty. “The state is the curse of the individual. With what is the strength of Prussia as a state bought? With the merging of the individual in the political and geographical concept. The waiter makes the best soldier. Now turn to the Jewish people, the nobility of the human race. How has it preserved itself—isolated, poetical—despite all the barbarity from without? Because it had no state to burden it. . . . Make willingness and spiritual kinship the only essentials in the case of a union, and you have the beginnings of a liberty that is of some value.” It is odd to notice how near Ibsen gets in his views on the state to the Voluntaryist Creed of the late Auberon

Herbert ; and, like Mr. Herbert, he does not take sufficient account of the vast part played by social inertia in most people's lives, or rather he assumes that this inertia is always a bad influence. Nor is his citation of the Jews really sound. What has kept Judaism together has been not only race unity, but the stronger bond of a very definite religion buttressed by very definite ritual duties. Ibsen may have suspected this in demanding "spiritual kinship" as an essential for union, but I doubt if he ever recognized the enormous power for good that institutional religion can be : or, what is still more important, that most men must have some general political or ecclesiastical body by which their spirit may enjoy the exercise of true freedom. For Ibsen, with consequences on his work that I shall consider later, freedom almost invariably implies revolt : and if there is nothing external to revolt against, a man must rebel against a certain side of himself. Ibsen's idea of life is that of the surgeon, not of the physician ; and in a period which was drowsy with the drugs of indifferent doctors, it is this fact which gives his life its significance and value.

Ibsen was one of those rare men who, without effort, are enabled to keep ahead of the life of their time. No doubt he lost something by his unwillingness to read modern literature ; but he

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was rightly impatient of the over-cultured tone of the self-styled liberals of Europe. He saw that too great attention to books and theories was blinding people to the real men and women who were presenting life in a way that knew no rules of text-book, and could only with difficulty submit to analysis. Brandes was once incautious enough to send his friend a translation of Mill's *Utilitarianism*: and this was the thanks he got: "I can't imagine why you took the trouble to translate this work: the sage-like Philistinism of it recalls Cicero and Seneca. I'm certain you could have written a book ten times as good in half the time the translation must have taken you. And I believe you are doing Stuart Mill a gross injustice when you doubt the truth of his assertion that he got all his ideas from his wife!"

There is no evidence that Ibsen despised ordinary learning. Indeed he seems to have regarded his own inability to get much out of books as a disadvantage; and certainly in so far that it delayed due recognition of his greatness among the slower academic judges of literature, he did lose something. But what is a loss like this compared with the gain in freshness, in audacity, in clearness and strength of treatment that Ibsen's freedom from literary bias gave him? The technique of his craft he knew as no other dramatist knew it: and a knowledge



of technique is the only lesson that a supreme artist should learn consciously from his predecessors.

The more one reads of Ibsen's life, and then of his plays, the more certain does the truth stand out that he got himself, all the best and truest of him, into his work. Whether he felt that he had been too hard in his use of life for art it is not easy to decide: the acute preoccupation with the problem of life against art, a preoccupation so noticeable in his last four plays, may be appealed to as evidence that Ibsen felt he had lost something: that he, like Rubek, had killed Love in his effort to create works of art: but we must beware of forcing the dramatist into the position of any of his characters. What can be said with confidence is this: that Ibsen from his youth on saw clearly that nothing was of so much importance in life as true personal relationship, vivid and candid contact between husband and wife, father and son, friend and friend. Whether he felt this because he had found it the greatest thing in his own life; or whether he had learnt the truth by missing the experience, is not, at any rate for the present, possible to discover. Nor indeed does it much matter. We know clearly enough what his ideals were; and his personal struggles, his failure or success do not concern us so much

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as his great record of those other fighters, in picturing whose struggles he shows so plainly on which side he stands, in what army he was enrolled. However little we may be willing to identify Ibsen with this or that character, or to read into his life their opinions or circumstances, this we may always say: he was always in sympathy with the fighter. Nothing roused or pleased him so much as opposition. It is perhaps the quality, mean as it is, of fight in Hedda Gabler that forced Ibsen to make her, even, tolerable. His passion for conflict was a generous passion to be understood, to break his way into the thick armies of prejudice, ignorance and hate: and it is this which made people defend him so vehemently, and as vehemently attack. To-day, now that we can see more clearly how predominant was the artist in Ibsen, even in his quarrels, while still appreciating his magnificent combativeness we can appraise it more rightly as part of the equipment that put him, for so many years, at the head of European dramatists.

## II

### THE POEMS: HISTORICAL PLAYS: LOVE'S COMEDY

*The Poet's essential task is to see, not to reflect.* 1871.

*Everything which I have created as a poet has had its birth in a frame of mind and in a situation in life.* 1870.

IBSEN always thought of himself as a poet. I am not here concerned to defend the principle, sound as it seems to me, that the word "poetry" in English should be kept to signify literature in which regular rhythm, of a recurrent kind, is one of the most important parts. Prose has its own glory and its own realm: supremely good prose is as rare as supremely good poetry, the prose-writer should be too proud to borrow the word "poetry" for the best effects of his own medium. Still, it would be pedantic not to admit that there are some authors whose proper medium is poetry; that is, they naturally express, intensely, by vision or symbol rather than by analysis and illustration. Such a man, whatever his actual medium is, will never succeed in ridding himself of that curious, direct beauty which is the note of poetry: he will always reveal rather than explain, he will plant a rose while another is describing one.



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This note of the poet Ibsen never quite lost. In his early lyrics it is as evident as the promise in them of later ideas and conceptions. Of the beauty of his poems none save those who can read Danish can form any adequate notion: there are no translations that do not rob the originals of at least half their effect. I can only quote one of the most characteristic in the hope that something in the version may tempt a reader to turn to the original.

“ Mine-wall ! crash and crashing break  
At the heavy strokes I make !  
On until the ore’s deep singing  
Echoes back my hammer’s ringing.

“ In the mountain’s depth of night  
Still there calls the treasure’s light—  
Diamonds and jewels holden  
In the mine’s veins, red and golden.

“ In the deep is peace, ah ! peace  
Of the eternal wilderness—  
Break the way, my hammer ! Enter  
To the hidden mystery’s centre.

“ Once I sat a merry lad  
’Neath the heavens star-yclad,  
Spring’s gay path my feet were pressing,  
Youth’s sweet peace my soul possessing.

“ But I lost the glorious day  
In the midnight’s sombre ray,  
Lost the hillside’s song divine in  
The aisles and chancels of the mining.

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“ When I first came here I said  
(Foolish child !) ‘ The riddle’s read !  
The deep’s spirit holds for me  
The clue to life’s long mystery.’

“ Ah ! No spirit has explain’d  
Things that puzzled me and pain’d ;  
Ah ! no ray of light has risen  
Upwards from this earthy prison.

“ Have I fail’d, then ? Will my way  
Never lead to clearer day ?  
Yet the light of upper skies  
Blinds and dazzles still mine eyes.

“ Nay, still down ! I must not cease :  
There is the eternal peace.  
Break the way, my hammer ! Enter  
To the hidden mystery’s centre !

“ Stroke on stroke I smite my way  
Onwards until life’s last day.  
Not a glimpse of morn surprises :  
Not a ray of hope uprises.”

In the volume of *Digte* with which Ibsen’s collected work begins there is every variety of verse : occasional, satiric, narrative, purely lyrical and mystical. There are signs in many of the poems of ideas that he subsequently treated in his dramas ; but his verse, which is most of it early work, contains no hint that I can discover of his preoccupation with the problems of marriage and of human relationship, although his philosophy of Will is foreshadowed in that

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grim poem *På Vidderne*. After he had once decided on the drama as his proper method Ibsen's poems were infrequent and unimportant; there is, however, one which has a peculiar interest of its own. It is the key-lyric to *The Master Builder*, and was written as late as 1892.

“ There in the cosy house, the twain, they dwell  
Through the long autumns and the wild Decembers—  
The house burnt down. All to sheer rubbish fell.  
The twain must grope, must grope among the embers.

“ For in the embers is a jewel lying  
Hidden, a jewel fire can never hurt.  
If each search faithfully, there's no denying  
That he or she may find it 'mid the dirt.

“ But if they find it, if—those burnt-out twain,—  
This precious jewel fire cannot destroy.  
Never shall she find her burnt faith again;  
Never will he discover his burnt joy.”

It is not my intention, however, to linger over Ibsen's minor poems. Beautiful as many of them are in form, there is nothing in them which he did not say with equal emphasis and generally equal success in his later or mature work: and for the exegesis of Ibsen a knowledge of the poems, though useful, is by no means absolutely necessary.

The plays dealing with saga-subjects, or with Norwegian history, cannot be dismissed quite so quickly. We need not take Ibsen's own declara-

tion "not until my marriage did more serious interests take possession of my life" quite literally: people in love are a little too apt to be unable to distinguish between cause and coincidence; frequently the marriage which the lover takes as the cause of a particular change is only one sign of it. Ibsen at the period of his marriage was evidently arriving, slowly but surely, at those philosophic conclusions which, always in poetical form, are to manifest themselves in his work. He found love and marriage helped him to realize himself and his task, and I would be the last to minimize the extent of that help; but we may be sure that it was not in Ibsen to go on writing ordinary "costume" or historical plays with an occasional hint of spiritual and realistic truth. Some change was inevitable; and although his marriage may have definitely settled the lines of that change, he was working towards them before he even met Susanna Thoresen.

His first play of importance, *Lady Inger of Östrat*, except in its handling of the contrasted characters of Lady Inger and Elina her daughter, has little sign of the future Ibsen. It is a good, sombre and unrelenting drama, far more Greek in feeling than Norwegian, if we take the sagas as the type of Norwegian heroic literature; for it has all the Greek feeling of fate, and little of the Scandinavian atmosphere of defiance. Nyls

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Lykke, the villain, half libertine and half traitor, shows a little of the hand that afterwards drew Peer Gynt, but the play as a whole, strong as it is, is no more typical of Ibsen in its characters than in its ideas. *The Feast at Solhaug* has really no qualities that need detain us: its place in Ibsen's life I have already told, and otherwise its interest is simply that which attaches to any great man's Juvenilia.

In *The Vikings at Helgeland* we have a play that can boldly stand comparison with any of the great historical plays of Europe. I do not mean that it is comparable to Shakespeare's best; but it is not easy to find anything parallel to it (or to *The Pretenders*) outside Shakespeare. It has far more vigour and passion than Schiller's historic plays. It has far more touch with earth and man than Goethe could show in *Count Egmont*. It has affinities, perhaps, with Morris' rendering of the sagas; but I can find in it none of that sentimentalism which has been brought against it, as against (and with justice) Tennyson's *Idylls*. The figure of Ornulf, the most splendid type of a splendid tradition, as he sings the death-song on the barrow of his slain sons, over the grave of his murdered Benjamin, alone should avail to redeem Ibsen from the charge of watering down the stark blood and steel of the sagas.

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“Seven sons had Ornulf,  
By the great gods granted.  
Alone now and life-weary  
Wanders he, sonless.

“Seven sons so splendid,  
Bred among sword blades,  
Made a great rampart  
Round the stark sea-king.

“Ruin’d is the rampart,  
Slain my sons sturdy ;  
Gone is my gladness,  
Desolate my dwelling.

. . . .

“Nought the Norn denied me  
Of her dread treasures,  
Showering all honours  
O’er Ornulf’s world-way.

. . . .

“Though she stripped me sonless,  
One great gift she gave me,  
Songcraft’s mighty secret,  
Skill to sing my sorrows.

“On my lips she laid it,  
The great gift of song-craft ;  
Loud then let my lay sound  
Ev’n where they are lying.

“Hail, my seven sons sturdy !  
Hail, as homeward ride ye !  
Songcraft’s splendid god-gift  
Stayeth woe and wailing.”



Even more impressive than Ornulf is the savage yet noble character of Hiördis, who remains one of the most majestic representatives of those stern, demanding, yet self-possessed women of whom Ibsen was to give us so many. Her figure, and that of the girl Dagny, reappear again and again in his work; and no doubt represented to him not only two women, but the two aspects of that feminine character whose secrets he was never tired of disclosing.

*The Pretenders* has a more strictly historical background than any of Ibsen's other plays. Its action is nearer our own times, and it is concerned not with semi-heroic figures whose diplomacy is half savagery and half superstition, but with the rather sordid, very intense political atmosphere of the early thirteenth century. It has in it four characters altogether worthy of Ibsen: the two claimants to the throne, Håkon, and Earl Skule, Bishop Nicholas and Jatgeir Skeld. It is in the mouth of this last that Ibsen puts one of the most suggestive of his sayings.

KING SKULE. Tell me, Jatgeir, how came you to be a bard? Who taught you song-craft?

JATGEIR. Song-craft cannot be taught, O King.

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KING S. Cannot be taught? How came it then?

JATGEIR. The gift of sorrow came to me, and I was a bard.

KING S. Then it is the gift of sorrow that a bard needs?

JATGEIR. It was sorrow *I* needed. Others may need faith, or joy, or doubt——

KING S. Doubt as well?

JATGEIR. Yes; but then the doubter must be strong and sound.

KING S. And what do you mean by an unsound doubter?

JATGEIR. He who doubts his own doubt.

KING S. (*slowly*). That, surely, were death.

JATGEIR. 'Tis worse; 'tis death in life!

It is the thought which recurs again, for a moment, in *Brand*; which is worked out so truly in *The Master Builder*. No doubt, as Ibsen hinted in a letter of 1870, this play represented much of his personal feelings at the time. He was on the verge of leaving his country; and he was leaving it under a cloud of misunderstanding and abuse. This abuse had been showered upon him when he published *Love's Comedy*, a year before the issue of *The Pretenders*.

*Love's Comedy* is, in some ways, the crudest of Ibsen's serious dramas. It is largely a satire



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on the betrothal customs of his native land ; on the indulgence in that unreal and meaningless sentiment that is bound together around marriage with the growth of prudery and false reticence ; an attack on that divorce between love and marriage which is certain to come where the sexes have little natural intercourse, where marriages are arranged by family counsel, parental interference or the artful construction of a matrimonial atmosphere. The hero Falk is bitter against all these things. Ibsen had just, no doubt, had to endure them ; and being no doubt rather a self-conscious youth was quite needlessly impatient of the coyly humorous gossiping of a betrothal. Ibsen, however, married : Falk decides that the only way to preserve love is for marriages not to be an affair of affection, and for lovers to refrain from marrying. In the play Falk leaves Swanhild, but this is by no means a necessary corollary of his doctrine. It amazes me, indeed, to read English comments on this play. Dr. Herford says : " If we ask what is the condition which will secure courtship from ridicule, and marriage from disillusion, Ibsen abruptly parts company with his predecessors " [other critics of conventional love-making and marrying] : " ' Of course,' reply the rest in chorus, ' deep and sincere love ; together, add some, with prudent good sense.' The prudent good sense Ibsen allows :

but he couples with it the startling paradox that the first condition of a happy marriage is the absence of love, and the first condition of an enduring love the absence of marriage." Dr. Herford's "startling paradox" has been a commonplace of romantic and critical literature since at least the days of Marie of France. It is astonishing that any one at all conversant with European literature should not observe that Falk's (I will not call it Ibsen's) idea of love is just a provincial and rather crude version of the Dantesque theory of Love, as shown in Dante's relations with Beatrice. But Dante is on too high a level for comparison with *Love's Comedy*. Let me take a writer nearer to the spirit of levity, and full of worldly wisdom. "I see no marriages faile sooner, or more troubled, than such as are concluded for beauties sake, and hudled up for amorous desires. There are required more solid foundations, a more constant grounds, and a more warie marching to it: this earnest youthly haste serveth to no purpose. Those who thinke to honour marriage, by joyning love with it (in mine opinion) doe as those, who to doe vertue a favour, holde that nobilitie is no other thing than vertue. . . . A good marriage (if any there be) refuses the company and condition of love; it endeavoureth to present those of amity. . . . It may be compared to a cage,

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the birds without dispaire to get in, and those within dispaire to get out. . . . Few men have wedded their sweethearts, their paramours, or mistresses, but have come home by Weeping Crosse, and ere long repented their bargaine." So wrote Montaigne, and it might be Guldstad's voice speaking. The truth is that this sharp division between love and marriage must always be felt in an age when the women are not men's equals, and when marriage is a question of expediency, of the family, of "the custom and use of common life." And so long as the division is felt you will have ardent souls rebelling against it, and cynical souls, at any rate in the evening of their lives, defending and excusing it. I do not think we need seek further for Ibsen's mind in *Love's Comedy* than to say that it is his first protest on behalf of women, the first diatribe against the conventions and laws that make any human being more of an occasion than a creature, more of a subject than a soul. Much of the play is just a young man's half-serious wrath against the dictates of the drawing-room, even within the drawing-room's sphere: what is more serious in it is a protest against those same dictates when they presume to lay hold on the sacred things of life and love. Sooner than have his treasure on those terms Falk is prepared to leave Swanhild and marriage,

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and tramp along keeping his bride "in the eternal life." It is not, of course, Ibsen's final word on the problem, and we must take care not to lay too much stress on the renunciation scene. Ibsen never lays down general rules as to method; that was the way for Falk, just as sorrow was what Jatgeir needed. All that the poet insists on is that in any human relationship the first thing to be studied is reality, and truth: and that an over-attention to the accidents of any relationship tends to make people forget the truth and the reality. It is the old truth that it is the altar which sanctifies the gift, and Ibsen, at least, will make sure that it is the altar at which he stands, however poor and empty-handed may be his approach.

### III

## BRAND : PEER GYNT

*There are actually moments when the whole history of the world appears to me one huge shipwreck, and the only important thing seems to be to save one's self. 1871.*

It is, I think, generally assumed in all criticism of *Brand* that the final trial of his faith is when the Doctor, fresh from Brand's mother's death-bed, bids him leave his cell and his icy home if he wishes to save his child's life. After a scene of doubt, of agony, of discussion with Agnes, Brand decides to stay, and dooms his child. Now I agree that this scene with the Doctor is the keynote of the poem, but I deny that Brand's response is the true one; I do not mean absolutely true, but that it is in accordance with his character and his mission. Readers of the play will remember that Brand comes back to his village and is content there, in spite of ambition, to begin his work of burying the old god of Einar and all careless Christians. His war-cry is "All or Nothing," and he refuses to go to his dying mother so long as she clings to her

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gold; then the Doctor accuses him of being harder with others than with himself, when Brand in horror at the fate that threatens his child, prepares to leave his post. Brand drugs himself by repeating "All or Nothing," drugs his wife, and kills, in effect, his child.

Now this act of his is treated, for instance by Mr. Garrett, as fine, and having "the pity and terror of life." I think Mr. Garrett and others in this have confused the message of the poem with the inevitable course of the tragedy. This response of Brand's, the refusal to leave even to save his child's life, is not the crown on a strong and vigorous creed; it is a lapse, a confession of weakness, an ignoble act of failure. What right has Brand to decide that God is asking for his child's death rather than demanding his child should live? if to save his child's life be to forsake his creed, then Brand forsook it when he married Agnes. Why should he decide that God, even his stern God, asks him to renounce Alf, if he allowed him to cherish Agnes? *Brand* is not the history of a soul that climbs from one height to another of renunciation and self-denial, and is then splendidly overwhelmed by the forces of nature, while a mysterious voice "ends upon a note of vague hope." It is the far more tragic history of a soul who begins his noble life with a determination for self-denial, who achieves



## BRAND

much, and who alas ! when the real test comes, breaks on the rock that so many high souls are dashed against, the rock of pride.

This, to my mind, Ibsen makes plain enough. After the Doctor's kindly taunt a man comes from the village to see Brand.

THE MAN. Your seed was springing, left and right,  
Until the Sheriff's gossip ran  
And struck the green blades with a blight.  
He's spread the rumour, everywhere,  
That soon the parsonage 'll be bare ;  
He says, you'll turn your back and go  
Once your rich mother's laid below,

BRAND. And if it were so ?——

THE MAN. Priest, I know you,  
And whence these slander weeds have grown ;  
You've stood against him, you alone ;  
He's grappled and he could not throw you ;  
And *there's* a grudge he'll always owe you.

BRAND (*hesitatingly*). There might be truth in what he spread.

THE MAN. Then you have lied before us all.

BRAND. I, lied ?

THE MAN. How often have you said  
That God has roused you to His call,—  
That now with us you have your home,  
That it is here you'll overcome ;



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That man must hold his mission's field,  
Strike blow on blow and never yield?  
Yours is the call! for strong and bright  
Your fire's in many a breast alight!

BRAND. Man, here the crowd is deaf and blind.  
Quenched down and dull'd is every mind.

THE MAN. Nay, you know better; many a one  
Has caught a glimpse of heaven and sun.

BRAND. In tenfold more is gloomy night.

THE MAN. You are the lamp that gives the light.  
But let all this be as it may,  
Here is no need to count, I say;  
For here stand I, one only man,  
And say, desert me if you can!  
I too have got a soul: I look  
To you to help me with the Book;  
'Tis you that dragged me from the deep;—  
Now see if you dare let me slip!  
You cannot! Firm I hold as oak;  
My soul were lost if this hold broke!  
Farewell! I know I shall not see  
My priest forsake his God and me.

To this appeal, and to the wild hints of the mad girl Gerd, Brand yields. His pride, for that is surely his rock of offence, is too great for his love and trust. He makes the wrong decision, and then, with a heart-broken cry, calls out "Jesu! Jesu! give me light." Surely never

## BRAND

was Ibsen's enormous power of irony more poignantly used than when he put this prayer into Brand's mouth after he had made up his mind.

This incident is, as I have said, the keynote of the tragedy. It is Brand's failure to give up "All" that, from this point, turns his life to failure, almost to madness and then to the defeat which remained for him the only victory. He had the chance of applying his own stern message to himself; he had the chance of giving up his call, and instead he gave up first his child, then his wife and, in a final desperate effort, his own life. He sacrificed what is given to a man only to cherish: no man can exercise the right of renunciation for another, not for wife or child. And when the avalanche breaks over his head, and in answer to his appeal—

" Answer me, O God above !  
In death's jaws : can human will,  
Summ'd, avail no fraction still  
Of Salvation ? "—

a voice cries through the thunder's roar " God is Love," we have a play ending not in a renewal of that false sentiment which Brand has denied and denounced, but on a reassertion of the truth that Ibsen is never tired of repeating, that nothing can count against Love. Brand fails because he was false to Love; his sin was essentially the same as John Gabriel Borkman's,

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he sacrificed to his ambition the woman who loved him.

I am aware that there are sentences of Ibsen's own which seem to contradict this theory of the central motive of *Brand*. He speaks of him as of a man who "stood firm," and says that the demand "all or nothing" is made in all domains of life ; but still I would urge here the fact that the poet is not the best interpreter of his play. In writing so resonant, so complete and perfect a poem as *Brand* it is only natural that the author should be carried away by the splendour of his chief character, for *Brand* is always splendid. But in the joy of creation, and even in subsequent thought, the poet may not see the full significance of his character. I rather think that at this period there were uncertainties in Ibsen's mind ; but this is at any rate worthy of notice that if we keep to the ordinary interpretation of the play which renders *Brand* a mistaken but glorious hero who goes from one height of self-denial to another, we have to explain away the end of the poem as a kind of romantic lapse. This I refuse to do. I cannot believe that Ibsen, who was never romantic in mind, and whose romanticism of method was more the result of environment and literary tradition than of any settled theory, would have spoiled the whole significance of his play for the sake of a weak

tag, and a meaningless concession to popular feeling. Brand's tragedy, for me, ceases to be tragic if we view the play in the accepted sense as the orderly development of a strong character finally beaten by forces too great for him ; and it is incredible to me that Ibsen, whose whole creed is based on the two great corner-stones of Will and Love, should ever have entertained seriously such a conception as a man entirely crushed by fate. No, Brand's condemnation is out of his own mouth ; he ranges, in his very different sphere, with Torvald and Rubek ; he had the great opportunity, he could have achieved the miracle of miracles, and he failed. The moment he points to the house-door instead of to the garden-gate, at that moment he pronounces his own doom in his abandonment of his great principles. For one moment he allowed the appearance of things rather than the things themselves to guide him, and that moment was fatal.

Of the general power and beauty of *Brand* there is to-day hardly need to speak. It has long ago taken its place beside *Faust* as one of the few great dramatic poems of Europe. What is perhaps most noticeable in it is the care with which Ibsen avoids caricature (save perhaps in Dean) in his representation of the people and forces opposed to Brand. He never allows us to think that all the right is on Brand's side even

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in the earlier acts when Brand is so vastly superior to his opponents. In this way the play is as considerable an achievement as the *Antigone*; it shows a clear battle between two principles, one of which, it is true, is greater than the other; but in each of them are elements of nobility and truth. The Doctor, who does not deny physical succour to Brand's mother; the Sheriff, who is at any rate concerned for the physical well-being of his neighbours; Gerd, who illustrates so pathetically and forcibly what a fine nature warped must make out of Brand's passionate attack upon institutions; even Einar, who shows how mean a cry the clarion "All or Nothing" may become in the lips of a narrow nature—they all help, not only to throw Brand's principle into greater contrast, but also to show the higher truth which would reconcile Brand and the Sheriff, or, shall we say, Brand and Agnes. For it is the character of Agnes which, for many of us, makes *Brand* a more enchanting poem than *Faust*. This girl whose joy, on her "conversion," turns not to bitterness, but to strength; who understands Brand better than he understands himself; whose character remains sweet even after Brand's fall, is one of the most splendid and sincere women in all Ibsen's works. Nothing is more subtle or surer than the great scene in the fourth act when Agnes, after the terrible



episode of the Vagrant Woman, repeats with so intense a terror the cruel lesson that she has learnt from her husband. With the loss of her child began the dying of Agnes: Brand when he deliberately sacrificed the love which he should have cherished, lost the love that cherished him; love the woman follows love the child out into the darkness, and Brand is left alone to wrestle with the growing and insane terror of his final conflict.

In the great last act, after the enthusiasm of the following crowd has flagged and failed, the Dean, the Sheriff, and the people he befriended taunt him with his failures, with the loss of his child and wife. It is the final punishment of all that his acts should be questioned, not his motives. But it was in motive that he had failed; he had glorified Will at the expense of Love, and the avalanche testifies not to the breaking of Will by blind fate, but to the swallowing up of Will in divine Love.

It has been suggested to me that the scene between Brand and the wraith of Agnes in Act V makes my interpretation of the crisis in Act III an impossible one. "Here," it is argued, "you have Agnes urging Brand to return, to accept life with her and Alf; and his refusal is treated as something to be applauded." This is true; but this criticism ignores the point of my

contention. I insist not that Brand ought to have left with Agnes and Alf; but that he ought to have seen that such departure was the real corollary of his own catchword. The wraith of Agnes asks him to give up his watchword "All or Nothing." This, of course, was never Brand's duty: where he fails is in applying his watchword. He really ends not by giving God all, but by giving God nothing, or as near to nothing as any man can get. He sins in believing the problem of Cæsar versus God to be one of simple subtraction; that everything taken from Cæsar naturally goes to God. Of course the real problem of any idealist is to find out not what his duty is, but how he can do it. Brand, whenever he comes to a knot, cuts it, whenever he meets the Sphinx, kills her; just as Peer Gynt walks round the Sphinx and throws away the knotted string, while Solveig unties the knot and, by reading the riddle, takes the Sphinx captive.

If, too, Brand's character is taken as developing serenely along right lines, what is the significance of that other passage in the last scene when he bursts into tears and cries:

"Frost endures throughout the Law;  
Then comes sunlight, then the thaw!  
Till to-day I strove to be  
Tablets for God to write on me;



## PEER GYNT

From to-day my life shall flow  
Free and rich, with warmth a-glow.  
Now the ice crust breaks away  
I can weep . . . and kneel . . . and pray!"

This passage appears to me, like the conclusion of the poem, to be mere nonsense unless we assume that somewhere in his life Brand has gone crooked and perverse; and both from its character and structure I argue that the "somewhere" is the episode when he decides his child's fate.

*Peer Gynt* has three main motives. It is an attack on the spirit which is content with appearance rather than realities; it is a defence of the doctrine—just as is *Brand* and half a dozen other plays—that Love can save to the uttermost; and without discussing it embodies Ibsen's interest in heredity.

In its first aspect *Peer Gynt* is an obvious foil to *Brand*. Peer wants not All, but Everything; and he gets most things in life, and in getting them almost misses the whole. He is not the true dreamer; he is a man of fancy, not of imagination. He dreams the dreams of others, and lives on the old fairy-stories of his country. Here he is but the son of his mother, who tells Solveig—

"Yes—you must know that my man used to drink,  
Around the parish for gossip would slink,  
Wasted and threw to the winds all our stuff.  
And meanwhile sat Peerkin and I, all day;

The best thing was to keep memory away—  
 To bear up under all I've found hard enough.  
 It's a horrible thing to look fate in the eyes;  
 And of course one would gladly try and shake sorrow off,  
 And do all one can to keep thoughts of to-morrow off.  
 Some take to brandy, and some take to lies,  
 And we—well, we took to fairy-tales  
 Of princes and trolls and grim beasts with scales.  
 And bride-rape as well. But who could have said  
 That those tales of the fiends would stick in his head?"

Peer, the dreamer of others' dreams : Peer, a sort of pinchbeck Shelley, once in his life comes into contact with reality. He meets Solveig, loves her, quarrels with her, and then flies from reality to its shadow in the arms of Ingrid, to its degradation in the embraces of the Saeter-girls, and to its caricature in the liaison with the Troll-maiden. Then Solveig meets him again, and Peer, full of ugly pride, boasts that "The Dovre-King's daughter wants me for her own"; and Solveig flees.

This brings to the surface all that is best in Peer. Outlawed, he builds in the forest a hut, and to him there Solveig comes; Peer here becomes greater than Brand ever is. He does not propound to his love a decree to which she must assent; he is humble, thankful and happy—for some five minutes in full touch with reality. Then comes his trial. The Troll-maiden, hideously transformed, comes to him

in the forest, bringing with her the misshapen brat, born of Peer's desires. She demands her place by Solveig's side. Peer cannot make up his mind to tell Solveig the truth, yet he will not stoop to deceive her. He flees and leaves Solveig to live on the memory of the true Peer, while he himself trails over Europe, Egypt and America, ever pursuing the phantom of living, but having left life itself behind. Everyone knows now that wonderful fifth act in which Peer re-enacts so many of his past experiences and memories ; he has lost, almost, his capacity for false dreaming, and tinsel no longer seems like gold. Yet he clings still to his old sham standards, and when everything else is gone, he clings to the reality of his sins.

Then comes the Button-Moulder, and denies that his sins have been genuine. He is given a chance, and again another to prove his point that he has, at last, in his sins been himself ; but all his witnesses, even the Devil himself, fail him. The old man, disillusioned, cries out—

“Then a soul can, so horribly poor, slip away  
 Back to nothingness, into the mists and the grey . . .  
 O beautiful earth, be not angry, I pray,  
 That for nothing I've trampled thy grass sweet-smelling.  
 O beautiful sun, thou hast squander'd away  
 Thy glory of light on a desolate dwelling ;  
 To warm and attune it was none to begin there—  
 The owner, they tell me, was never within there.

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Beautiful sun and beautiful earth,  
You were foolish to cherish my mother at birth.  
The spirit is niggard and nature is lavish,  
And one's life for one's birth is a high price to ravish. . . .  
I will up to the hills, to the loftiest one ;  
I will look once more on the rising sun,  
Gaze over the promised land, gaze away  
Till I'm tired ; then try and get snow-drifts to cover me,  
And ' Here NO ONE lies buried ' have written over me—  
And afterwards—then—! Let things go as they may."

But the play does not end on this note of despair. Peer wanders back to the forest where years before he welcomed Solveig ; and there she still sits and waits. Here, at last, is a real sin : here at least in his betrayal and desertion he was himself. He cries out to Solveig :

PEER GYNT. Have you doom for the sinner. Then speak the word.

SOLVEIG. It is he ! It is he ! O ! praised be the Lord.

PEER GYNT. All my sins and trespasses ! Cry and call !

SOLVEIG. My own lad, in nought hast thou sinn'd at all !

THE BUTTON-MOULDER. The sin-list, Peer Gynt ?

PEER GYNT. Cry out all my wrong !

SOLVEIG. Thou hast made all my life as a beautiful song !

Blessed be thou, whom at last I am greeting !

Blessed, thrice-blessed our Whitsun-morn meeting !

PEER GYNT. Then I am lost.

# PEER GYNT

SOLVEIG. One yet reigns in the skies.

PEER GYNT. Lost! If you have not for riddles replies.

SOLVEIG. Ask me them.

PEER GYNT. Ask them!—Ah! once we get started—!

Can you tell me where Peer Gynt has been since we parted?

SOLVEIG. Been?

PEER GYNT. As when first from God's thought he went winging;

Been with his destiny's mark on his brow!

Can'st thou tell me that? If not, I must bow

And go down where the mists are clinging

SOLVEIG. Ah, that riddle is easy.

PEER GYNT. If you know it, speak now!

Where *was* I, myself, I, the true man, the whole?

Where was I with the seal of God set on my soul?

SOLVEIG. In my faith, in my hope, in my love wast thou.

PEER GYNT. What say you! Ah! peace! With words you are playing.

You are mother yourself to the lad who is there.

SOLVEIG. Yes, I am; but who is his father, Peer?

Surely he who forgives at the mother's praying.

PEER GYNT. My mother! My wife! Woman pure from all sin!—

Oh! hide me, hide me therein!

Ever since Ibsen has been studied at all this conclusion to *Peer Gynt* has been severely criticized; "crowningly unreal self-realization" is the flippant comment of Mr. Shaw. That is a possible view; but if it is the true one, we are compelled to own that not only is Peer deceived, but the poet himself. For if there is one clearer theme than this—the saving power of love—in Ibsen's whole dramatic work, I know not where to look for it. The truth is the critics of this solution are themselves obsessed with the old romanticism which they ascribe to Ibsen. Mr. Shaw's chief fault has always been sentimentalism, sweet in such a play as *Candida*, rancid in *The Philanderer*, strong in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and sloppy in *Blanco Posnet*: he naturally fears and finds sentiment in the most unlikely quarters, and his fear of it makes him find it here. What then is the difference between this solution of Ibsen's and the ordinary romantic one? It should, I think, be sufficiently obvious. The romantic gives us, time and again, a character who is represented as fine and defiant and nobly wicked: he is generally saved, still believing himself to be a fine fellow, by senile attachment to some old sentiment which he has always half despised and forgotten. Now Ibsen gives us a picture clean contrary to this. He shows us a man who, in



a pitiless way, is stripped of every rag of self-conceit ; who has always cherished, even in his most futile moments, some recollection of the one fine reality in his life, who, at last, turns to that for condemnation and then finds not destruction but life. And as if to warn us that the self-realization is not empty or unreal Ibsen makes the Button-Moulder warn Peer that they will meet again. It will not be enough for Peer to slip into a lazy acceptance of offered salvation ; he will have, at the final crossways, to show what use he has made of it.<sup>1</sup> Again, too, such a criticism as Georg Brandes' complaint against the conclusion as "glaringly conventional": "Solveig, by her faithful love, saves the really wholly unworthy soul of her beloved," seems to me to show a complete misapprehension of Ibsen's meaning. In the romantic sense (Brandes compares the conclusion of *Peer Gynt* with that of *Faust* and *Adam Homo*) no one can save another's soul, salvation is never of a *passive* object : and Ibsen, if even as a boy he may have

<sup>1</sup> In a play so full of correspondences as *Peer Gynt* it is worth noticing that Peer meets the Button-Moulder at three crossways, which may be taken to correspond to his three missed opportunities, viz. in Act I, when he tries to bully Solveig into dancing with him ; in Act II, when he tries to impress her by bragging of the Dovre Princess ; in Act III, when he shirks telling Solveig the truth. The fourth crossway, after the final reconciliation with Solveig, is outside the drama.



dreamt of such an ideal, can never have accepted it. It is the central error of that Calvinism from which he seems to have revolted as soon as he understood it. The whole point of *Peer Gynt* is that Peer has got a real life: reality is a matter of intensity, and he felt truly and deeply and sincerely his love for Solveig. To object that externally he was false to that ideal, that he befouled and besmirched it, is right, but you cannot go on to conclude from that that he lost his ideal. Solveig's happiness in the true Peer is far more of a fact than all Peer's wanderings and weaknesses and lies, for her happiness is based on something real in his character; his offences are only those of a weak, shiftless creature, never of a really bad man. To allow Peer's indignities and dreams to weigh against this one true characteristic is to commit the offence that modern critics have condemned in Ibsen: it is to sacrifice the real to the unreal. Those who say Solveig's love for Peer saves him have misunderstood the whole drama; it is Peer's love for Solveig, still flickering amid disaster, ruin and disgrace, that gives him the strength and the right to look forward with confidence to the ultimate crossway.

It is necessary here to notice briefly the theological atmosphere of the two poetic plays. There is no need, I think, to plunge into com-

parisons between Ibsen and Soren Kierkegård; Ibsen himself has left it on record that Kierkegård was not the model of Brand, and in a letter to his sister he acknowledges that a religious revival at Skien, of which one Pastor Lammers was the leader, had left traces on his literary productions. Brand, too, he told Georg Brandes, might have been a sculptor; his clerical character is accidental: yet with all this the theological tinge of *Brand*, *Peer Gynt* and *Emperor and Galilean* is far from accidental. Brand's religious language may be taken as due to his profession, but Peer Gynt is scarcely less ready in his references to God and to religion. Both plays represent Ibsen's gradual abandonment—of which there is a hint in another letter to his sister—of the Calvinist creed of his country. Now quite the most noticeable feature of popular Calvinism is its tendency to replace the doctrine of the Atonement by the doctrine of substitution. Brand is on his crusade to bury the old God, whose terrors have become trivial; but he is still not free from the idea that Christ was the price of our sins that a cunning devil bargained out of an angry God. [Now, in *Peer Gynt*, probably quite unconsciously Ibsen has arrived at the Catholic doctrine of the Atonement, that the merits of Christ are indeed our salvation but have to be applied by the in-

dividual. I said "unconsciously," but indeed the resemblance to a doctrinal statement at the end of the play, "He who forgives at the mother's praying," is so strong that I wonder whether his arrival at the truth was unconscious. Solveig saves Peer only by helping him to save himself: when Ibsen brought his play to that conclusion he shook off for ever the old formulæ of Calvinism.

While the beauty of *Brand* can be discovered by English readers in two admirable versions, *Peer Gynt* still waits for a worthy English dress. Mr. Archer would be the last to claim that his sincere and literal version is more than the skeleton of a great poem. The loss of rhyme detracts enormously—especially in the long fourth act—from the humour, the lightness, the gaiety and splendour of the play. I am afraid with regard to *Peer Gynt* I have no patience with the critics who wish this or that scene left out. The fourth act, which was treated so hardly on the first publication, contains scenes so astounding as the explosion of the yacht; so beautiful as Peer's greeting to the morning and so humorous as the scene with the monkeys. I think, too, that the faults of the first scene have been exaggerated; the conversation between Peer Gynt and his four companions serves to put us in a right frame of mind to

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appreciate the great gap of years between Act IV and Act III. And is there not something worthy of Browning in Peer's account of his trading adventures?

MR. COTTON. What did you trade in?

PEER GYNT. Most I scored  
By negro slaves for Carolina  
And idol-images for China.

M. BATHON. Fi donc!

TRUMEPETERSTRALE. The devil! Uncle Gynt!

PEER GYNT. The trade was almost absolutely  
Impossible is what you think?  
I felt the same myself acutely.  
I thought it ev'n abominable.  
But pray believe me, once you're in it,  
To break away you'll scarce be able.  
'Tis very hard to interrupt  
So vast a business, so expensive,  
Employing thousands in extensive  
Enterprise, to end all abrupt!  
It's that "abrupt" I can't abide;  
But then upon the other side  
I've always found myself agree  
With those who care for consequences,  
And that to overstep the fences  
Has never seem'd . . . quite *nice* to me.  
Besides that, youth and I were sundering;

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Back to the forties no endeavour  
Would take me ; and my hair was grey ;  
And though my health could not be better  
A thought clung to me, like a fetter :  
Who knows how soon may dawn the day  
When the great verdict shall be thundering  
That parts the sheep and goats for ever ?

It might be the very spirit of Manchester speaking, the spirit of the people who opposed Shaftesbury, and still plead for the freedom of commerce from moral conditions !

It is not, however, for its satire that the world will value *Peer Gynt*. The bald skeleton I gave was only intended to show the lines of the argument of the play ; it took no account of the wonderful character of Peer's mother, Åse, who figures in what is the most pathetic death-scene in modern literature, not to be matched outside Shakespeare. The reality, the truth under the grim humour, of Åse's death-scene cannot escape in any version, though it is impossible to achieve the inimitable lilt of the original.

PEER. You sang many a song, you remember ?  
As you sat down here by my bed,  
To shorten the nights of November,  
And I had the fur over me spread.

## PEER GYNT

ÅSE. Ah! Remember! We play'd at sledges  
When your father was far away; there  
For our fjörd with the sharp ice-edges  
The floor; and our apron the fur.

PEER. Yes, but the best of course is,—  
Do you remember that, too?  
Mother, the fleet-footed horses—?

ÅSE. Remember! Be sure I do!  
We had Kari's cat as a loan; and  
It sat on the chair—oh! the fun—

PEER. To the Castle West of the Moon and  
The Castle East of the Sun;  
To Soria-Moria castle  
High and low, the road ran wide:  
We found a stick with a tassel;  
“'Twill serve for a whip,” we cried.

Never before perhaps have all the little things of life been brought to such a poignancy as they are in *Peer Gynt*. Ibsen disdains to try and get his effect by heightening or idealizing. Åse is just a peasant woman, chattering, foolish, scatter-brained; Solveig is a simple, trustful country girl; Peer himself never quite loses the touch of vulgarity that so invariably attaches itself to the man who tries to be a “blade.” Yet out of these materials Ibsen has written one of the greatest tragedies in literature. We are entranced as we read it; we cease to care, after the first few pages, whether it conforms to any



known rule or not ; we are ready to echo at the end, with its author, " My book is poetry ; and, if it is not, then it will be. The conception of poetry shall be made to conform to the book." Fortunately we in England shook off the academic critic earlier than did Scandinavia ; the Danish critic Petersen will only go down to posterity as the man who said *Peer Gynt* was not poetry.

It is a greater poem than *Brand*, more original, richer and in the application of rhythm to meaning amazingly powerful and original. It has affinities with other European work, but it comes nearer to Aristophanes than to any modern author. Its astonishing buoyancy of treatment, its unflagging temper, the mastery of the theme, the ease with which Ibsen turns from grave to gay are all reminiscent of the author of *The Birds* and *The Frogs*. But the figure of Åse was beyond the powers of Aristophanes, and by the creation of her and Agnes Ibsen took incontestable place among the few great men of letters of his age.

The tendency to regard *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* as companion poems is a true one ; but I cannot say as do some, that [Peer is the embodiment of the spirit of half-heartedness,] that he stands for all against which *Brand* protested. Nor do I agree with the conclusion that puts *Peer* down

as a worse fellow than Brand : after all Peer stands his one test successfully. He takes long about it, and he has many slips by the way ; but he does get home. Brand is false to his best self, false it is true with a splendour and sternness that half-hypnotize the reader into agreement with him : [Peer is, once and again, forgetful and negligent of his true self, but he is never false to it at bottom, else would Solveig have died] as Agnes died. So *Peer Gynt* while complementary to *Brand* is really also a criticism of it : [in it Ibsen shows that even a man with foolish and selfish habits can, by one great trait in his character, keep his soul more effectually than does another who is infinitely his superior in almost everything except this one capacity for being self-less, at any rate for a moment, for one other human being.] Brand, until he is broken to his knees in the final scene, has only one "soul-side," he looks at God, at his mother, at his people, at his wife from the platform or the pulpit. He acts to himself and to every one else. [Peer Gynt acts more consummately, more mischievously, more wickedly, if you will, to his God, to his mother, to his friends, but not to his beloved. So Peer, in that capacity for being himself in his love for Solveig, has kept a soul which avails him against the demands of the Button-Moulder.]

[ A great deal of the most characteristic work in *Peer Gynt* is due to the folk-tale origin of the play. Chief among the borrowed symbolic "properties" is the Boyg. It is worth while noticing that the Boyg cannot be, as Brandes suggests, the Spirit of Compromise or "the embodiment of all that turns aside and goes round about." The play itself suggests, pretty plainly, that the Boyg and the Sphinx are the same thing; and I am sure that the Boyg, so far from being "what turns aside," is precisely what does not turn aside. It is the riddle of life. It is that which tempts a man to stray from his course, to hold his hand, to evade, to lie and to pretend.

It represents that in life which grows and grows while it is yielded to, which feeds on fancy and increases with its opponent's tactical mistakes. It is that in life which yields swiftly at the touch of truth, at the slightest hint of reality. It represents all those puzzling, teasing problems of thought and conduct which a man can always solve—which Peer does in the end solve—by doing what is plainly the right thing at the moment. There is no need to press too literally all the other incidents that Ibsen borrowed from the folk-tale; and we must always remember the part that caprice plays in a poem like *Peer Gynt*, and many figures and incidents,

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like that of the Strange Passenger (as Ibsen acknowledged) are put in just because the young poet, drunk with the sun of Italy, thought he would. It is a great tribute to the essential unity of the play that, though written in that mood, it contains no inconsonant figure, no incongruous scene. There is nothing, however fantastic, in the play which does not help to throw light on the hero's character; there is no person, however seemingly intrusive, whose part has not a real connection with the problem of the drama. }

## IV

### EMPEROR AND GALILEAN

*In the character of Julian, however, as in most of what I have written in my riper years, there is much more of my own inner life than I care to acknowledge to the public. 1870.*

IBSEN'S world-drama remained, to the end, his favourite play. Nor is it difficult to see why. It occupied his thoughts for some nine years, those nine years the years between thirty-six and forty-five, when a man's maturest intellectual powers are showing themselves. He laboured on it, on and off, from 1864 to 1873, and he gave the period and character a remarkable amount of attention and study. Ibsen was no great reader, and he took no trouble, we are told, to "keep abreast of the times" by reading the literature of his contemporaries; yet this man, averse from regular study, impatient of book-learning, wandered through the writings of Gregory, of Ammianus, of Julian himself, through Danish pamphlets on Julian, and Neander's history. It is little wonder that he retained a great affection for the child of so much labour. While, however, we cannot dispute that Ibsen regarded *Emperor and Galilean* as his favourite book, no one will agree with him

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and call it his greatest. It is not that as a play, and it is not that as a spiritual document ; but it has, apart from its own striking merits, a great importance in throwing light on Ibsen's spiritual development.

The play, or rather the plays, suffer very greatly from the fact that in the second Ibsen suddenly makes the work bear the burden of his own "spiritual experience" or "inner life." In the first part we have a free reconstruction of Julian's youth. There is nothing impossible in the drama, nothing that is incongruous with what we know of Julian, or of the other historical personages that are put on the stage. The empty Christianity against which Julian rebels, the true Christianity of which his own spirit is part, the atmosphere of court intrigue and factious religious and political strife are all rendered with truth and skill. In the second play Ibsen, as Mr. Archer says, "cogs the dice against Julian"; he ascribes to him actions in which Julian had no share ; he invents unworthy motives for murders that Julian, probably sincerely, deplored ; he is not content with the actual miracles that did occur, but will have others about which his authorities are silent ; he makes out Julian's famous Edict about Education to be worse than it was ; he pits against Julian the memory of the past, the prejudices of



the present, and the menace of the future, and finally sends him out of the drama and the world, disgraced, dishonoured, an object of pity, indeed, but almost of ridicule as well.

Can we explain why Ibsen's sympathies suddenly veer round ? In the first part, while he is fair to the nobler elements in Christianity, he is evidently on Julian's side ; in the second part he is evidently tired of his hero, disgusted with his theories, and ready to mock at his religion. I do not think there is need to seek out any far-fetched explanation. I believe Ibsen began the play with the idea that Julian was an heroic character ; he discovered that he was only an heroic figure : Julian's dignity and heroism are simply that which we give to any man fighting against odds. He was a very tiresome, pedantic, scholastic person, more like our own James the First than anyone else. When Ibsen found this out he was suddenly seized with the conviction that Julian was wrong. Had his cause been right it would have made a far better fight than it did ; it would have won a few adherents and no sycophants, a few disciples and no parasites ; it would have blazed a real, and not a sort of Bengal, fire. Yet it was evident that Julian's protest was against ignoble things : where then did he fail ? He failed in not recognizing the nobility that lay behind so much that seemed

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ignoble. He failed in not seeing that all that was best in paganism had gone, or was going, into Christianity. He failed in believing that you could re-establish an outworn and discarded mythology. Whether Ibsen in the course of his reading came across Montanism, does not much matter. It is sufficient to notice that he puts into the mouth of Maximus the mystic language about the Third Kingdom which resembles the preaching of Montanus, or the later prophecies of Joachim of Flora. What is the Third Kingdom? I do not think we need seek for political solutions. Ibsen's chief problem at the moment, and for all his years afterwards, was how to reconcile body and spirit, freedom and institutions, love and marriage. It is this reconciliation which is to be the work of the Third Kingdom. "The kingdom of the flesh is absorbed in the kingdom of the spirit. But the kingdom of the spirit is no more final than is youth. You have striven to hinder the growth of youth, to prevent him from achieving manhood. Fool! You have drawn your sword against that which is to be, against the third kingdom in which the twin-natured shall reign."

In *Emperor and Galilean* Ibsen is forced, by the exigencies of his subject, to use language far more theological even than in *Brand*, but the problem he deals with is still more religious and

ethical than properly a theological one, or rather it is mystical. The idea of a Third Kingdom is connected, in the Symposium scene in *Cæsar's Apostasy*, with the union with the Pure Woman ; and it is typical of Ibsen's irony that he makes Julian find his ideal in Helena, whom the poet represents (with no authority from history) as unfaithful. Again we have a hint of the return of this motive in Julian's meeting with Makrina ; but it is a motive that yields altogether in significance to the idea of the kingdom of reconciliation. At the end of the play Ibsen represents Julian as "a scourge of God," and he has foreshadowed this in the obvious implication, in the Symposium scene, that Julian will stand with Cain and Judas. This is the other great motive of the play, freedom under necessity. Ibsen is no nearer solving the problem of free-will and predestination than any of his predecessors or successors : it is, as man is slowly coming to realize, that problem which we are required simply to state, not to solve. He is, however, on the right lines in his play, as his letters to Brandes at this period show. Brandes accused him of "thorough-going determinism," and Ibsen, without rebutting the charge, points out that what he has said is "he is free—under necessity." That is, all he has done is to take a highly exaggerated instance of the man whose

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actions do seem "determined." It is difficult to see what purpose Julian served except that of a "corner-stone of necessity," but Ibsen does not state that Julian's action was inevitable; he avoids that, and only says that after he made his decision to revive paganism the World-Will over-ruled him.

The problem of determinism, in different forms—the influence of heredity and environment—was to occupy Ibsen again; but he is, after this, perfectly clear about the freedom of the will. If Helmer is "determined" Nora is essentially "free"; if Oswald is the slave of heredity his mother has broken free from her environment; and if Gregers is the creature of his ideals, Gina is the maker and sustainer of her own life.

*Emperor and Galilean* had then an importance for Ibsen which it can never have for his readers. The first play is easy to read, vivid and enlightening in its action, bold and truthful in its characterization; but the second, which certainly meant more to the author, is tedious both in language and action. Julian's character is stationary during the whole play; he rules like a prig and talks like a pedant. And when once we have grasped the poet's meaning with regard to the Third Kingdom, and to Julian's position under the World-Will, we get very

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weary of the perpetual recurrence of the two ideas. They seem to be new to the author, and we wonder if the poet repeats them merely in order to convince himself. The two plays served their purpose in enabling Ibsen to get on paper ideas that he only formulated as he wrote, some of which indeed are formulated properly only in his later plays. But his world-drama is memorable as remaining for its author a source of inspiration, a treasure-house in whose ideas he was to find encouragement for "that life-work which I firmly believe and know God has given me to do."

## V

### THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH: THE PILLARS OF SOCIETY: A DOLL'S HOUSE

*The people at home think parochially, feel parochially, and regard everything from a parochial point of view.* 1873.

*There come great and beautiful moments when you see with joy and certainty where right lies.* 1873.

*THE League of Youth* is the first play in which Ibsen used modern prose language, and dealt with a modern "prose" problem. This fact alone would render the play of interest, even apart from its technical merits. These, I fancy, have been rather exaggerated. It is true that any play which deals with a situation in Norwegian politics somewhere about the year 1869 is at a disadvantage in appealing to an audience remote both in time and place. Its reception was stormy—recalling indeed to us the reception of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* in Dublin—but Ibsen's drama was not occupied with a theme so startling or with characters so real as Synge's. A complaint which Brandes brings against *Brand*, that the characters fall into categories, may be made far more truly against *The League of Youth*. You have the demagogue who is ready to lick the



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boots of the conservatives while he flatters the ears of the mob ; you have the typical conservative middle - class man of position ; you have his son, quietly disregarding his father's ideals ; you have the gutter journalist ; the easy widow and the amiable family friend. Against these one may put one original character, Selma, Bratsberg's daughter-in-law, wife of his undutiful son. When Erik hears that his schemes have failed and that he will lose his fortune, he turns to Selma for help ; and Selma makes the reply in which Brandes, with acute insight, saw the germ of *A Doll's House*.

How I have thirsted for a single drop of your troubles, your anxieties ! But when I begged for it you only put me off with a laugh. You have dressed me up like a doll ; you have played with me as you would have played with a child. Oh ! what a joy it would have been to me to take my share in your burdens ! How I longed, how I yearned for a big and high and strenuous part in life ! Now, Erik, you come to me, now that you have nothing else left. But I will not be treated simply as a last resource. I will have nothing to do with your troubles now. I won't stay with you. I would rather play and sing in the streets. Let me alone ! Let me alone !

That is certainly the most significant passage in the play. Whether Ibsen had grasped its whole significance we may doubt ; he certainly

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preferred to leave the problem alone until his powers were maturer and his views more determined. For the rest, *The League of Youth* is a forcible diatribe against the spirit of party politics; and its satire is, perhaps, as applicable to Sheffield as to Bratsberg's town. But the play disappoints in its weak grip on character. The climax, when the beaten Stensgård leaves in disgrace, does not make one feel that he is any better or any worse than the people who have beaten him. All are alike puppets, moved with remarkable skill, but not with the consummate mastery that Sir Arthur Pinero for instance uses in dealing with equally unreal material; and there is nothing in action and little in speech which approaches the incomparable naturalness of Ibsen's later plays.

*The Pillars of Society*, published eight years later, is a far truer and abler production. It is not only technically more excellent, but the characters have an interest for us which is not that of mere light comedy. None of them, it is true, takes a place in the front rank of Ibsen's men and women; but they have a reality and a conviction which belong to the people of no other dramatist of his age. In reading it we must recall again the fact that between its composition and that of *The League of Youth* had occurred the achievement of *Emperor and*

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*Galilean*, and a visit to his own country, the first made since his departure in 1864. I have already referred to the influence of locality on Ibsen's genius: that he was susceptible to place, like a great many artists, he himself realized acutely. He says in a letter to Peter Hansen, from which I have quoted before: "Environment has a great influence upon the poems which the imagination creates. Can I not, in the style of Christoff in *Jakob von Tyboe*, point at *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, and say, 'Behold! wine did this'? And is there not something in *The League of Youth* which reminds one of sausages and beer? I do not intend by this to place the last-mentioned play on a lower level, I only mean that my point of view has changed, because here [in Dresden] I am in a community well-ordered even to exhaustion. What on earth will happen when I reach home!" Well, he did not "reach home" till 1874, and then was only there for the summer; and it was three years before his visit bore any dramatic fruit. The difference between *The Pillars of Society* and *The League of Youth* is to my mind exactly what might be expected between a play written on a subject in which the author's interest was largely technical and "artistic," and a subject in which he found not only his artistic but his spiritual and intellectual energies aroused. After

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all, dealing with political problems was never Ibsen's *métier*—how quickly he escapes from generalization in *Rosmersholm*—and he obviously has a far more vivid sense of his characters, a far keener interest in their behaviour in this play which he began the year after his visit to Norway, when all his analytical capacity was still quick with the new people and new interests he had met.

It is true that *The Pillars of Society* suffers a little from the over-dominance of the story. The characters do not really develop their own fate in the thrilling way to which Ibsen accustomed us in his later plays. All, except perhaps Bornick himself, are overburdened with their position in the machinery of the drama; we find ourselves at times actually following the story apart from the people, even forgetting the people, until some new and fresher speech recalls our attention, in the details of the plot. It is not surprising that the play was a great acting success. It is full of sound workmanship and has innumerable good scenes which are at the same time entirely natural. What can be better, theoretically, and what truer to the situation than the curtain of the third act when Bornick answers from his office Krap's anxious query:—

Excuse my coming again, Count, but it's blowing up to a hurricane. . . . Is the *Indian Girl* to sail in spite of it?  
[After a short pause.]

BORNICK. The *Indian Girl* is to sail in spite of it.

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It is easy to see how that would still thrill an audience who knew that Bornick's brother-in-law, whom he has wronged, is to sail on the boat, and who suspected that his son was going to run away to it. And that act has already had two scenes, that between Bornick and Rörlund, and again between Johan, Dina, and Rörlund, which would make the fortune of any ordinary play.

In spite of its admirable qualities, however, the play does not hold us quite so magically as others of Ibsen's. I think this may partly be due to a certain hardness of treatment, which has not (as, for instance, in *Hedda Gabler*) the corollary of strength. The play is really, with its happy ending and its conventional characters, a sentimental play of the old school, written by a man whose insight into human motives and character surpassed any of the old-school dramatists. The result is an unfortunate cleavage between the characters and their environment; the dramatis personæ are a generation ahead of their play; they have strayed, somehow, into the wrong theatre, and we cannot help feeling that they have learnt the wrong parts and borrowed an alien business. It is for this reason that we are not as moved as we should be by the relations between Bornick, Betty and Lona, or between Martha and Johan. Lona, it is true,



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is not at all a woman who has taken to independence owing to the desertion of her lover, nor is Betty the ordinary wife of domestic comedy. But we do not feel that Lona Hessel is quite of a piece; she is scarcely the same character in the last act as in the first; she gets off the stage and on to the platform, a tendency shared, in a less degree, by Betty and Martha. Still in the relationships of these characters we have evidence that Ibsen has not changed his mind as to the fact of atonement: he has no doubts about its possibility and its occurrence. It is through Lona that Bornick saves his soul, and it is through Lona and Martha that Johan keeps his self-respect and attains his happiness. Ibsen may be an individualist, but he is always an individualist *à deux*: he may have his doubts about "communities," he has none about comradeship.

Two years after *The Pillars of Society*, appeared the play by which alone a great many English people know Ibsen's name. It is not easy to recollect that *A Doll's House* is now thirty-three years old. I have heard it said by a modern young man, after seeing a recent performance, that the play seemed perfectly ordinary, to contain nothing that anyone would object to. Yet, every day, "marriages" are entered upon exactly like Torvald's and Nora's,



every day men go home to wives who share nothing but their physical and emotional life, who have no interest in or knowledge of their business, their politics or their pleasures. And when we remember that Brieux in *Les Trois Filles de M. Dupont* puts into his heroine's mouth speeches that might have been uttered by Selma or Nora, I think we should be chary in agreeing that *A Doll's House* inculcates nothing but what everyone accepts. The truth is that with the alarming growth of a tolerance, based on indifference and bolstered by ignorance, any ideas, held with sufficient strength by a reasonably intelligent and forcible group of people, will nowadays gain—not acceptance, nor agreement, but the right to go unnoticed. And the ideas of *A Doll's House* no longer meet with disapproval simply because, like so many other matters of importance, they no longer meet with intelligent interest.

For me the only weakness in *A Doll's House* is the character of Torvald Helmer. There is no doubt that here Ibsen suffers from provinciality, a charge often brought against him without any justification. It is not, however, provinciality of thought: that the poet of *Peer Gynt* could never be guilty of; it is a provinciality of experience. Torvald is such a prig, so hopelessly and utterly unfit to be the hus-

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band of Nora at any stage of her development, that one feels almost as soon as the play begins and Nora is nibbling her macaroons, that she would never have lived with the creature for eight years. It is not merely the fact that Nora's character develops during the play that makes me feel that Torvald was always, socially and temperamentally, below his wife; even while she is still the "song-bird," we feel that there is a vulgarity about her husband that makes the union essentially unfitting. There is no reason to suppose that Ibsen wished Torvald to have an unpleasant effect on the audience; because the play would obviously gain enormously if he were more of a gentleman. And it is true that some critics seem satisfied with Torvald; Brandes, for instance, says, "What is specially fine and delicate in *A Doll's House* was that Ibsen had granted so much to the husband. What had he not conceded to him! The man is thoroughly honourable, scrupulously upright, thrifty, careful of his position in the eyes of strangers and inferiors, a faithful husband, a strict and loving father, kind-hearted, cultured," and so on. It is surely the oddest list of virtues—some are merely deduced from, not stated, in the play—to set against the fact that the man is, in a crisis, a cad. In short Brandes' criticism here shows strong traces of the "Copenhagen-

ism" of which Ibsen once accused him in another connection. His description of Torvald could only have come from a man accustomed to the Continental conventions about the position of wives, which, in ordinary society at least, have always been narrower than ours in England.<sup>1</sup>

Putting aside, however, the repugnance with which Torvald Helmer has always inspired me, I feel that in *A Doll's House* we still have an acute and able presentation of a difficult problem. "Problem" is a dangerous word, and I believe nothing does more harm to Ibsen's reputation than the generalizations his disciples have made. Ibsen does not state general cases. He is not concerned here with the problem of a man and a woman, mated for pleasure, whom a great crisis overtakes; he is concerned with two very real people, Torvald Helmer and Nora who, eight years before the play begins, married him. Nothing that Nora says is anything but peculiar to her character and her case; and her case depends on her character, on Torvald's character, on her father's—on a hundred little things that Ibsen introduces. When Ibsen, bored with some ethical question,

<sup>1</sup> I ought to say, in justice to Dr. Brandes, that in his later "impression" of Ibsen (sixteen years after the date of the judgment I have quoted) he calls Torvald Helmer "a worthy snob."

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grumbled that his business was to ask questions, he stated once for all what you can only forget at your peril in reading him. He does ask questions: that is he presents a situation, a life between live people, and their tragedy or comedy forces the question to our lips and his. The problem of *A Doll's House* is not should wives desert their husbands, any more than it is should wives forge; it is, What would you have Nora do, you moralists? Look! this is how it was—thus and thus. Now: ought she to go or to stay? That this is forgotten is certain from the fact that many people still talk about *A Doll's House* as “an attack upon marriage”; whereas the whole point of the play is whether Torvald and Nora are married or not. Nora is sure she is not, and Torvald, at the end, is he altogether certain where the truth lies? The play goes much deeper than any enquiry into marriage customs, or laws; these can never have interested Ibsen. Its real enquiry is into what makes any relationship possible between human beings, what is it that sanctifies or degrades the union between one human being and another?

In the scene between Torvald and Nora in the last act there are three sentences of hers and one of his which embody the three chief difficulties of the play, the three questions which Ibsen asks, the three questions which, even if

he does not hide his sympathies, he leaves to us to answer.

When Torvald has read Krogstad's letter he exclaims against Nora: "During all these eight years she who was my pride and my joy—a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal!" To that we have later on Nora's unconscious retort.

"It appears that a woman has no right to spare her dying father, or to save her husband's life! I do not believe that. . . . I must make up my mind which is right—society or I."

Then we have Nora's statement: "I believe that before all else I am a human being, or at least that I should try to become one."

And then, in answer to Torvald's, "No man sacrifices his honour, even for one he loves," is Nora's staggering reply: "Millions of women have done so."

The first of those problems, though it loomed large to Ibsen and to Nora, has been rather neglected in comparison to the other two. Ibsen at this time was evidently as heartily anti-state as ever: the state was the curse of the individual, the enemy that must be destroyed. The worst of this is that, like so many haters, Ibsen assigns more power to this idea than it really possesses in the ordinary man's mind. I have never met any one yet, of the type conveniently called "man of the world," who did



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not consider the point about the forgery a storm in a tea-cup, and Torvald's behaviour over it as only explicable on the grounds that he was a cad. Ibsen contrives very ingeniously that Nora's extreme fear of the law, following on her extreme ignorance, should seem natural; but for English readers Torvald's despicable running up of the scale, and ending in "criminal" is entirely incredible. I do not mean that there are not circles of society in England which would prefer a woman or a man to break all the commandments sooner than one law; but even in those circles you would find with difficulty a man, still passionately in love with his wife, condemning her in the way Torvald condemns Nora. His attitude, too, becomes less natural when, after reading Krogstad's second letter, he excuses his language as uttered in the hastiness of anger. If he had really been so hard in grain that "criminal" would have made the natural climax of his abuse he would not have omitted to improve the occasion, not as he does, but by the bullying methods inseparable from the temperament that puts law above justice and respectability above righteousness. To my mind the whole question of the state against the individual has been rather pulled into the play, with the result of dividing our interest without, at the same time, producing



a statement of the problem that we can really regard as particularly valuable.

The questions that are asked in the other clarion challenges divided, and still divide, many who would agree in their answering to the first by a thoroughgoing defence of Nora. Ibsen has often been misjudged with regard to the first of these two—the necessity for self-realization—by those who were ignorant of his previous work. It is odd that one should be called upon to say that the author of *Peer Gynt* is not an advocate of selfishness, that the creator of Agnes could hardly draw with evident sympathy the picture of a woman who for a whim or a phrase, would desert her children and her husband. I have already pointed out the danger of trying to make an abstract question out of Nora's problem; the question is, what ought she to do? Now if we remember what sort of a creation she is, neither child nor woman nor animal, we can hardly hesitate in our answer. Nora's critics have said: She may not have been ready for marriage, or fit for childbearing; but she incurred both responsibilities and she ought not to desert her post. It sounds plausible; but really has no relation to the facts. Nora was not unfit for marriage; she, the spoilt daughter of a self-indulgent old wastrel, was incapable of it. But her children? There are some women, no doubt,

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to whom child-birth and child-nurture give wisdom and add experience. But Nora was not one of these, she played with her children as her father had played with her; she is a person with no responsibilities, because she has never been allowed to have any duties. The truth is Ibsen has cut away the ground from the feet of his critics; no amount of theorizing, no amount of lecturing on the duties of home-life, or the converting effect of a common, tragic experience can overcome the stinging pathos of Nora's "Oh, Torvald, you are not the man to teach me to be a fit wife for you," and her "And I—how have I prepared myself to educate the children?"

There is another aspect of this question of self-realization which deserves comment. Who, after all, are the people who object to another, to a Nora, educating herself before she attempts to enter on other duties? What, precisely, is Torvald's relation to a human being to whom he would deny the right of finding her soul? It is all to Torvald Helmer's advantage, from a low point of view, that Nora should remain "the child." It will be less trouble for him to live with a person whom he will merely have to cherish and to chide, than to live with one with whom he will have to adjust and readjust his relationship. If Nora achieves personality and

self-expression Torvald's home-life will become almost as serious as his business experiences; he will have to take nearly as much trouble in talking to his wife as he does in talking to his cashier or his clerk. He will have to discover some common measure, in short, between his wife's character and his own. Up to the present the common measure has simply been his condescending affection, and her view of it—a view unexpressed and so in consequence regarded by both Torvald and Nora as identical with his. Then the situation is this, that the man who objects to Nora's self-realization, as something incredibly selfish and egotistic, is only realizing his own self at the expense of her character. This may seem fairly obvious, but I have found people who still insist that Nora is selfish, far more selfish than Torvald, because he at any rate is willing to give himself to her. They do not see that Torvald's giving is only a form of selfishness, that he gets out of his affection for Nora a happiness and a contentment far in advance of anything which he gives to her. She is, in short, for him a means of self-expression; he, for her, a check to self-realization. It was no doubt recognition of this which made Ibsen introduce the third problem into the drama.

The last sentence that I quoted as a kind of keynote to the play is the only one in it where

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Nora (and possibly Ibsen) seems to be introducing what is known as "feminism." The other problems in the play are distinctly problems between Torvald and Nora; there is nothing in her point of view which a man could not hold, there is nothing in his which many women would not accept. But with her "Millions of women have done so," Nora drops a barrier between her sex and her husband's. She feels that here, at last, in this bold statement of the complete supremacy and predominance of love, she has her sex on her side. When the play was written, I daresay that most men felt that Torvald with his "No man sacrifices his honour, even for one he loves," had his sex on his side. I feel sure that it was the only sentence of Torvald's in that great duologue which made the man in the stalls think "Ah! well, the fellow has got some stuff in him after all!" The sentiment aroused pleasant recollections of

"I could not love thee, Dear, so much  
Loved I not honour more."

I can see hundreds of men in theatres all over the world, during the pause after Torvald's sentence, thinking "Well, what can she say to that?" And breaking their expectancy, shattering their confidence, came Nora's reply. And what answer can man make? We know Tor-

vald could not answer at all: his "You think, you speak like a foolish child" is the stuttering anger of a man who has had the foundation of his world shaken. He has no answer to Nora's challenge. Although I believe as firmly as anyone that there is only one certain difference between a man and a woman, and that is that he is man and she is woman; though I am convinced you cannot with safety and fairness or honesty, legislate, or generalize or philosophize on the assumption that certain qualities are found in women, and other certain in men; yet I think it is foolish always to hesitate, even at the risk of making mistakes, from assuming that certain qualities, while not in the least proper or inseparable, are more often found in women than in men. And among the qualities which hitherto have distinguished man as apart from woman is the point of "honour." There was a time when in war between nations honour was almost the first consideration. Elizabeth's foreign policy has a quality that we may call feminine. She did not object, perhaps, to honour, but she wanted peace and prosperity more. It is significant that the lady of Suckling's ballad is evidently not expected to enjoy her cavalier's sentiments; and in one of the most popular modern re-renderings of the disgusting idea of sacrificing a woman's happiness to the



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needs of a pinchbeck dynasty it is the woman who would willingly leave Ruritania and its throne. Perhaps the commonest example of this difference between the sexes is the broken engagement. Does a girl ever insist on going through with an engagement and marrying a man she does not love because she has pledged her word? Yet many men have done so, and ruined their own lives and their wives'; or reduced both their own and their wives' ideals of marriage to a not uncomfortable domestic amiability.

Yet that on this point, too, of love against honour, we have changed a little is, I think, shown largely by the altered attitude about keeping the "plighted troth." It would be difficult now to be in any company of educated people and not find two or three men vehement in denouncing the character of a man who marries without love, from a mistaken sense of honour. However much he might incur blame for having made his blunder, he would not now be invariably regarded as concluding matters satisfactorily by adding deception to his original mistake.

It may of course be argued that this contest of love against honour is a false antithesis; that the quarrel never arises when the honour is disinterested and the love complete; that honour



is only a branch of affection, a younger sister of that amity which is the basis of all human relationships and which is best typified by marriage. One would not want to disagree with this ; but it is really beside the point. What Ibsen had to deal with, yet again, was not abstract problems, but problems as they bore on his two poor children, Torvald and Nora. And on the top of all the distinctive trials that afflict Nora, on the top of all the uncertainties and the agonies and the vain, brave hopes that are her own lovable and peculiar heritage, comes this one staggering difference that arises between her as a woman and Torvald as a man : that his love is not the final thing, not the background of his own life, not that which gives richness and meaning to everything else, but a sentiment that has its due and decorous place in a carefully guarded social convention, and torn away from that strikes him with nothing but anger and amazement.

## VI

### GHOSTS: AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE: THE WILD DUCK

*Anything rather than the present state of affairs—so say I.* 1872.

*The minority is always in the right.* 1872.

*Who will vouch for it that two and two do not make five up in Jupiter?* 1870.

ABOUT the terror and power of *Ghosts* there can be no two opinions. It is impossible,—I have just tried it,—to read, though it be the tenth time of reading, the awful scene between Regina, Oswald and his mother at the end of the play without feeling that one is in the merciless grip of a tragedy almost intolerable. The bare clean speech, the absolute economy of action, the frightful deliberation; the inevitable approach of the climax have the same power to move us as when the play was new. It seems almost incredible that people should have been moved to anger instead of to pity and tears; it is true, by the action of the Censor, *Ghosts* has never been presented for public performance in England; but, if we may judge from the reception of private performances, our critics, accustomed to *Lear* and *Hamlet*, could see nothing but the disgusting fancies of an obscene playwright in the tragedy of *Ghosts*. I suppose

dramatic critics are, as a class, more ignorant of religious feeling than any other body of men ; their notion of reverence, if I may judge by many notices of Mr. Shaw's plays, is to abstain from quoting the Bible, particularly if your quotation is apposite to the occasion and appropriate to the person. So they attacked *Ghosts* in the name of religion and morality. Yet if *Ghosts* has any fault it is that it is didactic, and that it teaches the old lesson that "the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." *Ghosts* is a picture of the consequences of evil-living.

I have never seen any explanation of why Ibsen, during the years that saw the production of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, was peculiarly interested in heredity. The subject had always had a place in his dramas. It is conspicuous in *Peer Gynt*, and perhaps not absent from *The Pillars of Society*. But in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* he is particularly concerned with it, and with one particular side of the problem, that is, the hereditary transmission of sexual disease. I made no reference to Dr. Ranke in writing about *A Doll's House*. The truth is his place in the drama has always puzzled me a little. He is there partly, perhaps, because in a household like the Helmers' there would be sure to be another man ; and partly because he serves as

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a foil to the pomposity of Torvald and the quiet of Nora. Yet his chief purpose, in Ibsen's mind, was, I believe, that he should make plain to the audience the awful power of heredity. Nora is her father's child, though she is represented as far more the victim of environment than of heredity: but look, says Ibsen, heredity has its victims even more tragic than false up-bringing. So Dr. Ranke goes through the play, an object-lesson, almost a threat.

The problem that Ibsen touched in this character received its full treatment in *Ghosts*. *Ghosts* is called a family-drama. Mrs. Alving, Oswald, Regina, Regina's supposed father and Pastor Manders are all the characters; the action of the play is continuous, and the scene unchanged. The play has the simplicity and directness of a Greek drama; there is an entire absence of any decorative detail; gaunt, severe and unrelenting the story grows upon the stage from the first whisper of Regina to the final murmur of Oswald. I do not think that it is a just complaint to say that *Ghosts* is lacking in richness and poetry: it is true, but the presence of more poetry or any greater wealth of treatment would have spoiled the play. When you have a problem as plain and direct as that with which *Ghosts* deals, anything but the simplest treatment is, I am sure, a mistake. Besides Ibsen has not left

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the tragedy entirely unrelieved. To have had Oswald's fate presented by itself would have been too much for any human being to stand; the horror of the thing would have overcome any audience. Also there would scarcely have been that element of intellectual conflict, without which the highest drama is impossible. That element is supplied in the problem of Mrs. Alving. Here *Ghosts* is almost a sequel to *A Doll's House*. Mrs. Alving is the wife of a man—bought by him, as she puts it—for whom she has no affection. She discovers her mistake and her husband's character, which is that of a reprobate, within a year of their marriage, flees from her home, and takes refuge with Pastor Manders, her friend and the man she loves. He lectures, upbraids and sends her back to a man who has not got it in him to repent or to reform: and from that return of Helen Alving spring *Ghosts*. In all Ibsen's work there is perhaps nothing subtler than the way in which he shows that Pastor Manders is really responsible not only for Oswald's birth, but also for the lying struggle to keep up appearances, for the atmosphere of deceit in which Oswald had been reared, and for the consequences of that atmosphere on Mrs. Alving and on Oswald. It is said that Ibsen used to be particularly insistent that Mrs. Alving's opinions

were her own, and not his : and we must always guard against the danger of crediting a dramatist with his characters' convictions. But I cannot believe that Ibsen did not think, as most decent men would, that Manders was an arrant coward to send back Helen to her husband. That sort of action is always based on a misuse of the convention or the standard for which the Manderses of the world profess to stand. If the relationship between Alving and his wife were so sacred that no filthy behaviour on his part could justify her leaving him, then what right had Manders to interfere between them ? What right has he to use the influence which he only possesses because Mrs. Alving feels towards him as, by his standards, no married woman ought to feel ? It is only by breaking his own rules that he can force the woman to keep them ; it is only by overstepping the boundary that he can push her back within the confines. That is the radical fallacy of Manders' position : it is a position which men who are accustomed to rule very often adopt ; adopt no doubt unconsciously until some Mrs. Alving opens their eyes.

It is perhaps as well to say here something about the subject of *Ghosts*. It is quite evident that hereditary disease could be made most objectionable and offensive on the stage. It is possibly still needful to remind my readers that



Ibsen is extraordinarily sparing of any horrors or physically terrible things in his plays. I do not mean to deny that it is legitimate to bring horrible action on to the stage; it has been successfully done by great dramatists. Ibsen, however, has been often accused, in such vague terms, of indecency and obscenity, that you still find a few people who are unwilling to believe that there are many of his plays in which death is an incident, and yet the deaths are not protracted scenes of unbearable suffering: still more unready are they to credit that the problem of *Ghosts* is examined with a reticence so striking that captious scientists have refused to recognize Oswald's disease at all. All else that need be said is that, whatever views may be held as to what is legitimate in art, it is obviously bad morality that "gay" living and its consequences should perpetually be represented from the standpoint of modern musical comedy and never from the standpoint of such a play as *Ghosts*. Owing to the national prudery of England we have lost the very frank references to sexual disease with which Elizabethan comedy abounded; and we are left with that most tiresome form of "amusing" play in which the silliest kind of innuendo has to be underlined by guffaws from the knowing part of the audience. A frank laugh over a Rabelaisian joke or a

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Decameron story, told in public, be it remembered, and to an audience of both sexes, is at any rate something human and intelligible ; the laughter, though aided by the impropriety, has its source in the humour of the joke. But the snigger, introduced by Sterne, at underclothing, at furtive aspects of perfectly decent things, at anything which is not usually mentioned, is surely one of the most grievous afflictions that the age of rationalism brought with it. Ibsen, though in these latter plays rarely laughing (but there is a grim humour about Engstrand, Regina's supposed father), is at any rate outspoken and decent ; he had been asked " Why should not Nora have stayed with her husband," and he answered the question with *Ghosts*.

In *Ghosts*, and in the three plays that followed it, Ibsen carried his favourite thesis of self-realization a step further. He now connects the question with the whole problem of truth. Quite apart from its special subject, *Ghosts* might be taken as the natural history of the Lie. There is nobody in the play who has truthful relations with any other person. Not only has Mrs. Alving's attitude to her husband and the world and her son been a lie, but so has her attitude to Regina and to Manders. Manders has lied to himself, and lied about Chamberlain Alving, and been lied to by Jacob

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Engstrand. Regina has been lied to by everyone, and is suspicious at the opening of the play about the sincerity of the atmosphere that surrounds her. Oswald has been lied to all his life, and has never been truthful, to himself or his mother, about his feelings towards her or his father. The sturdy old scoundrel Engstrand, with his plain lying, for his own advantage only, is a positive relief after the tortuous falsehoods of all the other characters.

Yet no unnecessary lies (except Engstrand's) have been told. If any ordinary moralist were posed, one by one, with Helen Alving's case, with Regina's, with Oswald's, with Manders', he would probably say that the lie was pardonable. It is only when we see the whole monstrous regiment together that we realize the bitterness of the "lie in the soul" which Manders forced on Mrs. Alving. And it is this aspect of the problem which became most important to Ibsen. His horror of institutions, exaggerated as it often was, enabled him to see the huge danger of conventional and familiar relationships. When Manders asks Mrs. Alving, "Have you forgotten that a son ought to love and honour his father and mother?", her reply, "Do not let us talk in such general terms. This is the question: Ought Oswald to love and honour Chamberlain Alving?" opens as big a question as Nora's

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statement of her primary duty to herself. Ibsen, as a dramatist, rightly puts his question in the particular; but it can be stated generally, and Pastor Manders makes haste to do so; he is uneasy, like all half-educated people, when he is brought to particulars. "Is there no voice in your mother's heart that forbids you to destroy your son's ideals?" "What about the truth?" says Mrs. Alving, only to meet with "But what about the ideals?" "Oh, ideals, ideals!" cries the poor woman, "if only I were not such a coward!" "Do not despise ideals, Mrs. Alving: they will avenge themselves cruelly." Thus, with infinite art, Ibsen pushes Manders back to apparent victory, yet real defeat. He is compelled to take refuge in an appeal to consequences. I do not mean that Ibsen was ever the person to advocate sheer disregard of consequences in particular cases; but it is plain that Manders is generalizing, and as generalization his ethics would demand that truth should be primary; truth must be told, though the honour of Alving fall. And he surrenders himself into Mrs. Alving's hands by advising her to do evil that evil may not come.

This side of the play was comparatively ignored: yet it is what Ibsen insists upon most in his famous, boisterous answer to his critics, *An Enemy of the People*. "What you are plead-

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ing for, you who stick up for Manders, is tampering with truth ; very well, here is what it may come to. If you begin to lie because of 'ideals,' you'll find others lying for interest. Indeed is there any difference, any radical difference, between lying for the sake of spiritual, and lying for the sake of physical, comfort ? ”

This is a bald enough statement of the theme of one of Ibsen's most humorous, genial and popular plays. Dr. Stockmann, who represents Ibsen's views and who, as Mr. Archer says, has carefully been constructed to bear not the slightest resemblance to the dramatist, is one of Ibsen's few male characters who is entirely lovable. Indeed *An Enemy of the People* is remarkable for its lack of strong feminine interest, a lack which makes the play all the more forcible as an answer to the outcry roused by *Ghosts*. Ibsen disdained to use against his foes anything less forcible than this strong, impatient, obstinate optimist, who turns gaily from the reform of sewage to the reform of souls ; who beats with equal ardour at the doors of commercial interest and of moral hypocrisy. There is too, I think, significance in his putting into the mouth of a man—and an extremely “manly” man at that, for Stockmann has all the hysterical passion characteristic of men who lead in public affairs, and all the vigorous sense that marks the great



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orator—the defence of a position which heretofore in his dramas has been upheld almost exclusively by women. It is Lona Hessel who pleads for truth in *The Pillars of Society*; it is Nora and again Mrs. Alving who clamour to get free from the burden of conventional falsehood that presses upon them. The men in these three plays are represented as either acquiescing or actually profiting by the existence of falsehood. Men, it is true, still occupy that position in *An Enemy of the People*; but they are now confronted by Thomas Stockmann, a man of twice their energy and ten times their honesty. Stockmann, too, is impatient of his wife's opinion, tenacious of his own and extremely regardless of arguments. It is amusing that in the course of the play Mrs. Stockmann and her husband change round over one of the doctor's most forcibly expressed opinions. In the third act Stockmann boasts "I have the compact majority behind me, you see!" and when Mrs. Stockmann complains "That is just what's so dreadful, that you should have such a horrid thing behind you," he only says "Nonsense, Katrina; you run home and look after your house, and leave me to take care of society." In the fourth act, in his great speech, Stockmann declares "The most dangerous foe to truth and freedom in our midst is the compact majority,"



and ends by saying, as Ibsen had said in private eleven years earlier, "The minority is always right."

It is possible to take too seriously this famous declaration of Ibsen-Stockmann's with its fellow-challenge, "The strongest man in the world is the man who stands most alone." They throw light on one another, for I think at times Ibsen was apt to confuse strength, the strength that comes to a resolute character from loneliness of conviction, with truth. No one was further removed than Ibsen from the crank, but there is a good deal of the crank in Stockmann; and both his watchwords lend themselves dangerously to the crank propaganda.

I have said that Ibsen never generalizes; but to this *An Enemy of the People* is an exception. There is no doubt that in it he not only allows Stockmann to generalize with a far greater freedom than he usually gives to characters with whom he is evidently in sympathy, but he also allowed his friends, and in a lesser way the public, to know he agreed with Stockmann's generalizations. Yet we must remember that all these generalizations had their origin in a very particular situation. In *Ghosts* Ibsen had appealed, not consciously perhaps, to the liberals of his country; he was bitterly disappointed at the timidity with which the official liberals had

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received the play. Those who were not actively abusive were silent; they "did not dare" to defend the notorious author of *Ghosts*. All voices, except those of Brandes and Björnson, were against the poet. Now it was this situation which gave birth to *An Enemy of the People*; Stockmann's diatribes about the minority are not purely anti-democratic, they are really little more than a statement of what is the obvious fact, that the extreme left generally hates most and is most hated by the official left. In England an obvious illustration would be the attitude of the Socialists to the Liberal party: in Ireland the tension between the Sinn Fein and the official nationalists. Or again, in theology, it is the Broad Churchmen who have most bitterly attacked the Modernists: an academic latitudinarian has less patience with Loisy than even has the Pope. The instinct, of course, is simply self-preservation. Your half-way-house politician, theologian, or moralist sees plainly enough that if the extreme man gets a hearing his occupation is done for: the mild rationalism of George Eliot or Cotter Morrison has a poor chance of survival against the full-blooded paganism of Nietzsche. So naturally enough the official liberals attack the sharpshooters, "the outposts," as Stockmann calls them; and the Stockmanns of the world retort

by cursing the majority. But it is not the crowd they curse so much as the crowd with the vote; they are enraged against the enfranchized masses, against that large number of people who are educated enough to have a vote but not educated enough to use it. Nothing is more annoying to persons of Ibsen's temperament than to find liberal phrases in the mouths of unideaed people; to discover that there are always some who will follow any movement, however apparently progressive, with the blind attachment that they gave to traditional things; and by their following they hold back those of their party who aspire more to influence than to truth, who court the immediate victory rather than the ultimate triumph.

Ibsen shows his strength in one point where he has been attacked for weakness, namely in making Stockmann's one consistent supporter, Captain Horster, a confessed Philistine in matters political and social. He upholds Stockmann partly no doubt out of a seaman's traditional desire to see the fighter has a good show, but mainly because he is in love with Stockmann's daughter. He is frankly contemptuous of the "friends of the people" who foregather in Stockmann's house; and he is, in spite of his liking for him, a little apt to laugh at Stockmann himself. He is evidently conventional in ideas, and not at all

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eager for change. The character ought to have warned those admirers of Ibsen who were presently taken aghast by *The Wild Duck*. For there is no question that Horster is one of the most favoured characters in the play. To my mind this is only in accordance with Ibsen's previous convictions. Horster has at any rate the supreme virtue—he knows exactly what his relations to people are, and he makes no pretence about them. All his relationships are based on reality, and the fact that this reality is his love for Petra, not any passion for Stockmann's schemes, does not render his essential rightness any the less. What he does, he does out of a sincere conviction; indeed he is, in a way, the most sincere, the most genuine person in the play, for the only three who could challenge him have a less direct and certain reality than he. Stockmann adds to his great sincerity a certain crankiness and a wilful obstinacy; Mrs. Stockmann has leanings, repressed though obvious, to comfort and ease at the expense of truth; Petra is in danger of becoming rather a little prig, with an over-solicitude for "movements" and "watch-words." Horster alone is "straight," a man without any humbug of any kind, transparently honest and immovably truthful. The will-o'-the-wisp of ideals and the firelight of respectability alike appeal in vain to him; he knows

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what he wants, and knows how to subordinate even truths to the truth.

In *The Wild Duck* Ibsen dealt with a man who, unlike Horster, could not distinguish between truths and the truth. Gregers Werle is a man who generalizes immediately: once anyone tells him a lie, he is a liar, a soldier for him would be a murderer, and also, I should think, the hangman. He has no notion of things in concrete at all; he deals solely with abstract virtues and vices, and so blunders immediately in his relations with human beings. I cannot for a moment believe that Ibsen thought Gregers was himself. He may have seen, even in his ironic way hoped, that people would take Gregers as a piece of self-portraiture; he may have actually intended to put Gregers forward as a caricature of his enemies' caricatures of himself; but taken in connection with his other plays, and his other characters, I see no reason to suppose that Gregers represents Ibsen any more than does Tesman or Borkman. There is one slight piece of evidence—it is true little stress is laid on it—which Mr. Archer quotes in defence of the identification of Ibsen and Gregers: namely, Gregers' watchword, "the claim of the ideal." It appears that Ibsen uses this phrase of himself in a letter to Mr. Gosse: but it is more important to see how he uses it in his



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plays. We have two people who are prominent in talking about the ideal: one is the fool Hialmar Tönnesen, in *The Pillars of Society*, the other the coward Manders, in *Ghosts*. In *Ghosts* the whole stress of one scene, nay, the whole stress of Mrs. Alving's problem is "Am I to support ideals or the truth?" and surely there is no doubt on which side the dramatist is. So when he produces a new play in which a character, who blunders from beginning to end, uses this same worn excuse, this dreary alternative to honest thinking, I can see no reason for supposing that the character represents the dramatist. To confuse "the ideal" with "the truth" is to mistake the whole meaning of Ibsen's work; he is perpetually protesting that truth and the ideal are always coming in contact, and that the only sound thing to do is to take refuge in reality. Of course all critics admit that Gregers' action is ill-advised; but too many have assumed that, in telling Hialmar Ekdal the truth, he is doing something analogous to what Mrs. Alving should have done, had she told her son and the world the truth about her husband. Really there is a huge difference between Hialmar's action and the action which Manders and Mrs. Alving should have taken. The difference does not lie merely in the fact that, in the case of *Ghosts*, the truth would have prevented a hideous course



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of cruelty, while in *The Wild Duck* the truth only brings unhappiness into a contented if rather foolish household. That is a difference, one that the Gregers of this world should consider. But the real difference is much deeper. In *Ghosts* the actual existence of the Alving family, the whole of the Alving "legend" is based on a lie: just as in *An Enemy of the People* the prosperity of the Baths is indissolubly bound with the falsehood believed about them. In *The Wild Duck* Gina's relations with Hialmar, and the affection of both of them for Hedvig, have nothing to do with old Werle's original act of deception. Though Hialmar is a shiftless fool, he is a perfectly happy fool, and his happiness is based on a real intercourse with his wife, and a real affection for his child. To tell him the truth would have, rightly, no sort of permanent effect on his family life, because his family life has never been nourished by the lie; it has an existence of its own. Nora's life, Helen Alving's life, Consul Bornick's life depended on the lie; each of them profited, each of them to some extent sold their souls for the lie. Now Hialmar and Gina gain nothing *real* from the lie; part of their material prosperity is due to it, but that does not affect their characters. The only person, indeed, who may be said to gain by the lie is old Werle: and he is not the kind of man

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to mind the truth, overmuch. He has lied as much from a sort of careless generosity as from any sinister motives of his own.

Thus Gregers' action is not only stupid ; it is, at least from the standpoint of the other plays, wrong. How wrong it is he does not apparently suspect, even when he has to keep on whipping Hialmar up to remembering the situation, attempting to make him act an "heroic" part towards a woman for whom his feelings have not really suffered the slightest alteration, except that he feels a conventional recoil proper to his class at meeting with a conventional offence. But nothing of Hialmar is changed except his sentiments and his speeches ; he keeps on trying to intoxicate himself into a fit of sorrowful anger with Gina, and Gregers endeavours to intoxicate him into a mood of ennoblement ; and all the while, for the first time in his life, Hialmar's real nature is in danger of being tinged by deceit. Mere veracity has brought falsehood in its train ; in the effort to keep step with Gregers' view of truth Hialmar begins to lose sight of real truth altogether, and it is only the sound of Hedvig's pistol that really shakes him out of his illusion.

*The Wild Duck* is then not an attack, or even a satire, on the position Ibsen adopted in his previous plays ; it is instead a restatement of

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the same conviction from a different standpoint. It continues the work of *An Enemy of the People*; there Ibsen attacked the majority of disciples who follow, without thinking, positions that only thought can excuse; here he attacks the mischievous crank who misinterprets any fresh movement. The cowards and the blackguards and the hypocrites are not the only enemies of truth; still more mischievous is the man who, before he has learnt to distinguish truth from falsehood, deems himself ready to be a prophet of the real.

*The Wild Duck* can, less almost than any of the plays of this period, be reduced, as I have been trying to do, to a bare statement of a problem. There is not a character in it, from Hialmar and Gregers to Molvik, whom we should not recognize immediately, were we to meet them in some provincial town. Ibsen's astounding creative power had never been exhibited with such richness, such variety, and such complete mastery of his medium. It was a feeling of this, I believe, that made him say of the play, "It occupies a place apart in my dramatic productions; its method of development is in many respects divergent from that of its predecessors." It is very noticeable that with the greater certainty of his plays, culminating in *Ghosts*, Ibsen had perceptibly narrowed his

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range ; there is hardly a sentence in *Ghosts* that does not have a direct influence on the theme. I have felt that in *Ghosts* Ibsen produces an effect not unlike that of three navvies striking at the iron pin that dislodges our London paving-stones. First one character strikes, then another, then the third : but each strikes the same pin, and drives it further in the same direction. The sense of deliberate force and purpose in *Ghosts* becomes almost unbearable. In *The Wild Duck* this is altered ; as before there is not a sentence which does not have its influence on the theme, but the influence is rarely direct. The play is just as intense, but it is far freer, far less arranged, far less under the direction of fate—and of the dramatist. *The Wild Duck* is, then, Ibsen's first play which is wholly "modern," not only in thought but in treatment. For anyone who has seen it, nay for one who has read it, the child's experiences come back, and life in the streets seems infinitely less real and actual than the bitter tragi-comedy of Gregers, Hedvig and Hjalmar.

*The Wild Duck* is also noteworthy for being the first of Ibsen's prose plays in which symbolism plays a large part. It is true that in *Ghosts* there is a good deal of rather mysterious business about the uninsured condition of the Orphanage ; but I think Ibsen only intended that the stress

should be laid on this to throw a further light on Manders' character, to show that he is not able to face criticism even in a matter where he would have got a good deal of support. Dismissing this, then, as in any case comparatively unimportant, the symbolism in *The Wild Duck* is a fresh characteristic of which none of Ibsen's plays in future were entirely to be deprived. In none, perhaps, has he used his symbols so skilfully. There is not a false note from beginning to end in all that difficult world of the garret, where the crazy old man is kept alive by memories that are almost hopes. What is so masterly in *The Wild Duck* is that all the symbolism falls absolutely into the play; we never suspect, as I do in *The Master-Builder*, that it is the dramatist's symbolism. It belongs intrinsically to Hedvig and her grandfather; and Gina, with an admirable rightness, serves to keep the symbolic world of the play far from the mistiness of Hauptmann, or the allegorizing of Maeterlinck. Ibsen's symbolism, here, at any rate, has the supreme quality that can alone successfully justify its use—it is a perfect language. What he expresses by the wild duck could not be expressed so perfectly by words: the symbolism of the play is a real channel of ideas, as true and as fresh as any of the old symbols that men get so used to that they



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sometimes take them for the reality. It has symbolism's ultimate beauty of being entirely appropriate to the characters and the circumstances, and it is not a little responsible for the fact that we leave this play with Hedvig's image fixed more definitely on our minds than that of any of the other characters. Hedvig, with her quick, loving temperament, with her alert child's mind, with her deep and passionate girl's nature is the truest and ablest portrait of a child in the whole of dramatic literature; and her perfection is very largely due to Ibsen's use of symbols.



## VII

### ROSMERSHOLM: THE LADY FROM THE SEA: HEDDA GABLER

*Distinction of soul seems to be on the decline at home.* 1882.  
*I miss the sea most.* 1880. *The old beauty is no longer beautiful.*  
*(Cæsar's Apostasy)* 1874.

IT is the character of Rebekka, "that Miss West," as the old servant calls her, which saves *Rosmersholm* from being the most depressing of Ibsen's later plays. It is full, even apart from Rebekka, of keen insight into men and matters ; in Rector Kroll we have a picture of the conventional man (though Kroll is not a cleric, but head of a school) who excels Manders in reality and force ; in Rosmer himself we have a curious portrayal of the man who, with a singular unfitness for the work, has allowed himself to be dragged into political questions and party warfare. But all the skill of the play does not suffice to disguise Ibsen's temperamental incapacity to enter with any real patience into political problems. He distrusted and disliked, above all things, the state and its manifestations. He had no aversion from authority, when he was sure the authority was real and worthy : even when it was despotic, as in Russia, he rejoiced,

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half-ironically, because of the "splendid oppression that they have, and the love of freedom that it engenders." But Ibsen never believed in political liberties; and he was probably speaking almost the precise truth when he said that the only thing he loved about liberty was the struggle for it. Now whatever may be thought of these views, it is evident that a man who holds them is not likely to produce an enthralling work, the subject of which is mainly political: and *Rosmersholm* does suffer from Ibsen's hatred of political forms. It is, however, saved gloriously by Rebekka West. We even forget the struggle between Kroll and Rosmer; we forget Kroll's anxiety over his children and Rosmer's unwillingness to wound his old friend, in watching the manner in which Rosmer and Rebekka are slowly brought to realize the relationship between them; what it means to them, what it will mean to Kroll and others, what it has meant to Beata, Rosmer's dead wife. In this treatment of the situation between Rosmer and Rebekka Ibsen again shows how far in advance of his party he stood. It is true that he puts some of his boldest things into the mouth of Mortensgård, whom it is difficult to treat with respect; but still Mortensgård does, once at least, touch what was a real weakness in the advanced people of the eighties.

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Since George Eliot's time it had been the habit to regard it as axiomatic that people who had freed themselves from Christian dogma would remain tied to Christian ethic. But there was, there still is in many quarters, a genuine weakness in the position of those who hold that Christian ethic will go on subsisting apart from its dogmatic foundation. New Superman is only old sinner writ large, and rather self-consciously; and it is not easy to distinguish between the old-fashioned libertine and the prophet of the New Age, except that the libertine had pluck.

Rosmer is a man of no humour, little passion, and rather vaguely quiet affections, who has not noticed himself being loved by a woman of exceptional character and strongly passionate temperament. As the story of the past, in Ibsen's familiar method, is slowly unravelled we see the hopeless position in which Rebekka found herself when she entered Rosmersholm. Here was Beata, a Nora with none of Nora's gaiety or hopefulness, Beata chilled by the atmosphere of Rosmersholm, nervously careful of her husband's needs, deprecatingly desirous that he should be happy. Rebekka, vigorous, modern, full of ideas, is pitched into the household. She sees what capacities for work, for strength, for nobleness there are in Rosmer; she does not see how much he is the creature of his past and his

surroundings ; she does not remember that if she can mould Rosmer so easily, therefore he is not a man who possesses the strength needed in a crisis. Then to her passion for the cause of emancipation is suddenly added “ a wild, uncontrollable passion ” for Rosmer ; and this sweeps Beata into the mill-race. Then, when the wife is dead, then when her goal lies straight before her, up rise the mists of Rosmer’s past, all the clouds of Rosmersholm, and blot her goal from view. Her strength is sapped ; she no longer has her old desires, nor even the desire for them ; and in time she is a slave of the Rosmer view of life “ which ennobles, but kills happiness.”

It is really, this story of Rebekka’s conquest, the story of one who has under-calculated the powers against her. Rebekka had not reckoned with that quality in her enemy which would appeal to her own character. She had broken free ; she hesitated not to lie, she did not shrink from murder : but she forgot that when the gods give freedom they give also, invariably, the capacity to bind oneself again, either to good or to evil. It is more dangerous to one’s pleasure in life to be free than to be contracted, for it is only the free who can contract themselves. And Rebekka does contract herself. Never before, perhaps, had the Rosmer view of life done any good to any human being ; but to this woman, with her

evil past, even the cold atmosphere of Rosmersholm brings peace, and quiet, and tranquillity. But she has given to Rosmer the dangerous gift of freedom, and he chooses ; chooses vaguely now one course, now another, and, finally, in a sort of crazy futility, chooses for Rebekka the same fate as Rebekka had chosen for Beata. "If you really love me, go and do what Beata does" ; and when Rebekka is willing, Rosmer goes with her—and the dead wife takes both.

For me, as I say, Rebekka saves the play. Rosmer is so repulsively will-less that I feel it a real blot on the drama that Ibsen should expect one to believe that a woman like Rebekka would have stayed at Rosmersholm for a day ; yet here Ibsen is certainly in accord with life, which is perpetually outraging the probabilities in affairs between men and women. It shows too how closely Ibsen has studied his characters that he made Rosmer a traditional conservative : for it is astonishing how often capable women will spend their time over attempting to convert some hopeless bigot, if his opinions are sufficiently obscurantist. Ibsen soon brings Rebekka sharply up against the human element in Rosmer and Rosmersholm, and she recognizes it, submits and succumbs.

I did an injustice to Ulric Brendel when I stated that Rebekka alone saved *Rosmersholm*



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from being the most depressing of the later plays. The incomparable figure of this Bohemian, with his large-handed, genial outlook, so far apart from Rebekka's tense vigour or Mortensgård's ink-stained policy, breaks into the play like a visitor from Ibsen's heroic dramas. Ulric is Viking; glad, triumphant, a kind of masculine Hilda Wangel, with less of that fascinating creature's passion for disturbing her friends. His entrances are managed with astonishing skill; and the whole character, so essential to the play and yet so apparently casual, shows how Ibsen's stagecraft improved with each drama that he wrote.

While I think the play would have gained had Rosmer been made a person of greater strength of character, it is difficult to give too much praise to Kroll. Strong, rough, quick-spoken, far too apt to fling mud, yet a man for whom it is possible to feel a respect that one can never feel for Manders, or the unutterable Röreund. It is unfortunate that Ibsen should have made his behaviour to Rebekka actively insolent; but this probably is due to the provincialism of his models. Kroll behaves exactly in the way, which by literary tradition belongs to merchants and self-made men; he does not behave like a gentleman. But for all that we feel that he is honest and straightforward and,



for mere force of character, worth five of his emancipated brother-in-law.

*The Lady from the Sea* is the first of Ibsen's prose plays in which the symbolism of the play is predominant. In *The Wild Duck* the symbolism is subordinate to an idea which, though in essence metaphysical, is plain and simple enough: in *The Lady from the Sea* it is the idea which is symbolic. It is as though Ibsen felt that he had treated the sexual relationship often enough and freely enough on its domestic, on its moral, and on its social side; that he remembered his old days when, though these aspects had never been forgotten, the other aspect, the greater and more permanent, was so big that it seemed all to him—the purely mystical and personal aspect which is what a young man and a poet means by Love. So in *The Lady from the Sea* he gives us not a different problem, but the problem treated from so different an angle that critics hardly recognized it as the same. Ellida, the wayward, singularly lovable heroine of the play, cannot conceive of personal relationship except as something mystical, mysterious and compelling; something whose very essence it is that it cannot be expressed in any language but the language of symbol and mystery, the language of the sea. Any analysis of the play, with its delicate

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management of the inter-relationships between Ellida and the Stranger and Wangel, is impossible to make without destroying the atmosphere of fancy and imagination that surrounds the characters. It is not only that Ibsen manages to suggest, without any crudity, the entire naturalness of Ellida's passion for the Stranger, and the reality of his symbolic connection with the open sea for which she pines; but also, with great subtlety, he makes Wangel not so much represent the "land-view" of life as the "tame-sea" view. It is odd indeed how here again, in quite another realm, we have Ibsen preoccupied with the quarrel between the Left and the Extreme Left. Wangel is, indeed, far the best of Ibsen's husbands. He is the only man of whom we feel that he not only has moments when, if pushed, he might do the right thing; but we are certain that fundamentally the man is sound, far sounder than the grey Stranger after whom Ellida yearns. It is this which renders the "happy ending" of the drama perfectly natural; it is gained by Wangel's turning the enemy's flank. He does not oppose the Stranger and all for which the Stranger stands by mere sound sense and appeal to duty, nor even by mere affection; in a moment of insight he sees that what Ellida wants is the feeling of freedom, that what the

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sea means to her is the soul and its inexorable claims, and in giving her the freedom of choice he assures her happiness. It is not, of course, that he could have anticipated the result of his decision. When he says, "Now you can choose your own path in full, full freedom" he believes that her path will take her away out of his garden into the dark with the Stranger. His bold step is not that of a man planning any future; it is that of Ibsen's ideal man, fearless of consequences, certain of his love, acting out of the agony of his heart. So, for Wangel, comes his happiness, late but certain.

The symbolic element is, then, quite in the ascendant in this play; but there are, of course, though subordinated, other qualities which recall earlier work of the poet's. Most noticeable is the recurrence, here, of Ibsen's favourite thesis of salvation by love. It is true that this motive recurs in *Rosmersholm* also. In that play Rebekka redeems herself by love; and could have saved Rosmer, had not the past and the image of Beata been too much for her and for him. But in *The Lady from the Sea* the whole crisis of the play turns on this old theme as surely as it does in *Peer Gynt*. The great difference here is that for once it is the man who is the dominant and invigorating personality. Ellida is full of charm, full of nameless ecstasy

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and a certain dignity of soul that makes her prominent among Ibsen's heroines ; but she has not attained the intellectual and spiritual stature that Wangel hides under his rather commonplace exterior. It is Wangel whose love for Ellida—he married to have a mother for his children, she to gain some position in life—grows and grows until it becomes that transforming thing which, for Ibsen, is the greatest motive power in human life. It, and it alone—that is essential—enables Wangel to make the great renunciation, and so to give Ellida, though unconscious of it, the dynamic power of another's personal affection ; a power that in Ibsen's as in Plato's philosophy is the surest guide to truth. Indeed at this stage of his career, and until the end, I am not sure that Ibsen had not become convinced that Love was the only guide to Truth. At any rate it is worth noticing that Rosmer and Rebekka end in the mill-race simply because Rosmer doubts Rebekka's love, and she, though her love is enough for herself, has not the power to flood his soul too : she has only just saved her own. And in *Hedda Gabler* the complete absence of real love, of any genuine personal relationship at all between the main characters of the play, give it a gloomy atmosphere of sordid falsehood that is unexampled in Ibsen's work.

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Sure, however, as Ibsen was of the power of Love, when based on freedom and living on truth, he was still as assured as ever of the complete disaster and disillusionment that awaits those who parody love. Ellida and Wangel escape just in time; but while they are achieving their escape his daughter Bolletta and Arnholm are also "contracting an alliance" from which the true spirit of marriage is entirely absent. To say of this, however, as Dr. Brandes does, that "it is to look along an endless vista of human disappointments" is to interpret not the play but the critic's view of it. It would be just as legitimate to say that, as Ellida and Wangel do arrive at happiness and truth, so Ibsen intends us to think that Bolletta and Arnholm may: this I believe to be as faulty as Dr. Brandes' deduction. Few, if any, critics have paid sufficient attention to Ibsen's old cry, "I put that in out of caprice"; and to the testimony of men who knew him in his prime that he had "a bit of the devil in him." I am sure that it was just the cynic in him which dictated all the Bolletta interest; a recrudescence of his anger at the general stupidity and falseness and hypocrisy of the world. "Yes, Ellida and Wangel may attain perfection—but, look at Bolletta!"

So far as the concentration of interest is concerned I agree with Mr. Archer that *The Lady*



## VIII

### THE MASTER-BUILDER: LITTLE EYOLF: JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN: WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN

*Nor can I help seeing conventions where others maintain there are enduring laws. 1864. These fellows had the courage to commit a folly occasionally. 1864. The lie involved in keeping silence is as much a lie as is a positive assertion. 1867. There is something better worth having than a clever head, that is a whole soul. 1865.*

THESE last four plays of Ibsen's are all very closely linked together. He himself said that the series which closed with the Epilogue (*When We Dead Awaken*) began with *The Master-BUILDER*. All that Ibsen meant by this may not be discoverable; but I am sure that one thing, very prominent in each of the four, which made him think of the plays as a united series, is the conflict between youth and age. It is most conspicuous in *The Master-BUILDER*; most prominent in the elfish figure who comes knocking at Solness' door. In *Little Eyolf*, the boy who has been for his father only a kind of educational opportunity, and for his mother only a regrettable interruption to her passion for her husband, by his death renders the younger generation felt in the house of Allmers. In *John Gabriel Borkman* the conflict between



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youth and age, between Erhart and the three who ask for his aid, ends in a violent cleavage: youth goes lightly to rather calculated pleasures, and age can only droop down to death and disappointment. In *When We Dead Awaken* the conflict is presented in Ibsen's familiar material, an unsuitable marriage; and Maia's clamour for youth and its pleasures and its rights breaks against Rubek's absorption in his work and its interests.

We may then say definitely that, besides his other problems, Ibsen in these years was taking deeply to heart the arrival of youth. No doubt much of his feeling was natural to so vigorous and alert a personality, as he felt that the age was, in its young people, occupied with other interests than his; that it regarded many of his questions as settled, and many of his puzzles as long ago read. And it is of peculiar interest how in these plays his attitude to youth changes. In *The Master-Builder* Hilda represents something definitely finer than Solness, and freer than Aline's ideals. The playwright seems to rejoice in the young advancing personality that swings into the middle of the melancholy and suspicion and distrust and ugly rivalry of Solness' house. He almost cheers on Hilda as, with lure and taunt and appeal, she works on Solness' feelings, changes his mind for him,

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makes him see, for a moment, the existence of his wife, and finally drives him up and up, only to die when his great work is accomplished. The note in *Little Eyolf* is far calmer and softer. Here again Eyolf is the true figure in the play. It is he who brings Allmers out of his ethical slush, and Rita out of her physical narrowness; but it is he, youth, that dies: it is only by dying he is triumphant. Youth is still victorious in Eyolf, as in Hilda, but the victory is gained at the cost of its own complete absorption.

In *John Gabriel Borkman* the conflict is more commonplace; indeed, though it is prominent, I cannot feel that Erhart's story is the first thing in the drama. The main interest is in Borkman and Ella. But here Ibsen says: "After all this conflict need not mean much: what is there to choose between youth and age? Youth only makes a different kind of mistake. There is no victory; there are no victories in life at all; at least not in lives like these. Age fails, and youth fails too." But in *When We Dead Awaken* we have a very different word. Here, to begin with, youth in the person of Maia confronts age in the person of one who is more vital than she. Maia is a kind of feminine Erhart, with none of Erhart's weak charm; she is hard and pretty, with a vulgar little soul.

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Still she is young, and Rubek feels his disadvantages. But in the end, when Maia—with Rubek's cynical permission; he is not going to fight in so ridiculous a battle—has gone off on her voyage of youth, physical, emotional youth, it is left to the old sculptor, through his meeting with Irene, to attain a youth of spirit and heart from which Maia, in her shrivelled worldly wisdom, is poles away. So Ibsen, in this last play, regains his hold over himself. He sees, as it were, that he has almost been in danger of getting obsessed with this knocking at the door. He wiped his mind clean from all his fancies about these vigorous, high-spirited men and maidens who clamoured for their castles. If it came to youth, he asked himself, what was youth, after all, but a spirit, and was not that his as much as anyone else's; did it not always remain for the man and woman who cared to claim it?

*The Master-Builder* has produced more controversy than any of Ibsen's plays; and it still divides the camp of his professed followers. I cannot see how anyone can think it an unlikely play for the author of *The Wild Duck* and *The Lady from the Sea* to have written. Its symbolism is doubtless more elaborate than that of either of the other plays, and it is quite free from those side-interests which encourage distraction in *The Lady from the Sea*. But the

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treatment, the retrospective method to which Ibsen has accustomed us, is the same as before; for I cannot think that the fact that it is mainly applied to Solness' psychological development is a very violent departure from the dramatist's method. After all in *Rosmersholm* the retrospection is concerned with Rosmer's and Rebekka's mental development far more than with any actual occurrences, such as Beata's death. Besides there is a good deal of actual affairs in the retrospect of *The Master-Builder*, and if these are, as Mr. Archer says, "few and simple," I do not find them much simpler than those in *Rosmersholm*. In *Rosmersholm* we only listen to the past of Beata, Rebekka and Rosmer—a past that is all one: but in *The Master-Builder* not only does the retrospect embrace the past of Hilda and Solness, brief, it is true, and with simple incidents, but also the past of Aline Solness and her husband. The greater "simplicity" of the material in *The Master-Builder* is due to the fact that the whole play is based on a conception of simple things which pulls them up into a reality where bigger, more difficult things seem as simple as a girl's whims or a woman moaning for her dolls. In the atmosphere, that wonderful breathless mountain-top atmosphere, that pervades the play from the minute Hilda enters, a word, a touch, a glance

in that magical past at Lysanger, a whisper, a sob, mean as much as murder and disaster and dishonour did at Rosmersholm. To say that in *The Master-Builder* "the retrospect is purely psychological" seems to me to lay undue emphasis on Solness; just as I cannot accept Mr. Archer's view that "the motive of the play is the soul-history of Halvard Solness." There are moments when I feel that Solness is only a fantasy of Hilda's, a figure of her triumphant march to the possession of her castle; this I know is an exaggeration, but I do not think it is more so than to lay the emphasis on Solness alone. Really, in spite of its greater fantasy, *The Master-Builder* is much more akin to Ibsen's other works than we have been inclined to think. A little unjustly we look at Aline through Solness' eyes, and at Kaia through Solness' and Aline's; and we might end by making Solness into the figure of enormous force which he thinks himself to be. But the true angle from which to interpret the play, from which to judge the characters, is Hilda's. And it is Hilda who, though she still has the love of mischief that was shown in *The Lady from the Sea*, sees the people in the house at their true value. When she first comes Mrs. Solness is less than nothing to her, but swiftly with intercourse comes understanding; and she



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says she will go away because "I cannot do any harm to anyone whom I know." And with all her recklessness, her devil, her strange air of non-humanity, it is Hilda who is quickest at getting into right relations with things. She for years has been living with a reality, one of those relations so certain and so secure that they can stand the contact with facts. Solness, nursing his sick conscience, uneasy, afraid of the younger generation, practical yet dreaming futile dreams of locking a door to which other hands hold the master-key, has lost all sense of real life, all feeling for real human beings. His wife, drab, unattractive, melancholy, is merely a sad sight to be avoided; Kaia, who is young without any great vitality, is just so much material to feed his vanity. Hilda forces him to *see* people. He has been living with human beings as if they were furniture; Hilda comes and reminds him that the most casual relation with another human being may engender a wonderful and abiding reality. He, after great sorrow and great disappointment, can do nothing but brood and endeavour to forget; Hilda shows him that nothing can be done save by remembering, treasuring up words that were scarcely whispered, and promises that only the heart knew. And when Hilda finds how much Solness has been neglecting, she turns and



shows him the only path for him to get at truth. He must abandon his clutch on the things of his youth, he must build castles in the air. That is all she will ask from him, it is that which she demands; for only thus can he and she go hand in hand and challenge the Mighty Lord.

To me the most puzzling thing in the play is Hilda's actual development in the course of it. That Ibsen intends Solness to be slightly obsessed, if not actually deranged in mind, I am sure; but I cannot be certain how far Hilda is meant to be affected by that. When she diagnoses Solness' illness as a sickly conscience, does she sow doubt in herself? Does she, from then, feel less certain about the beauty and splendour of Viking life, the thrilling joy of being carried away? Hilda is not a very young girl, she is between twenty-two and twenty-three; and Ibsen is careful in stating her age. It is possible that he himself is not certain how her character would develop; for instance whether the quality of pity—unconscious, even when felt—is in her at all when she first arrives at the house. But I believe that Ibsen did not mean that the robustness of her conscience really was sapped by the doubts that Solness harbours; merely that it might have exercised itself rather differently from the way in which she thought. There is no doubt at all that

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while Solness' forgetfulness and flippant treatment of her "claim" in the first act made not the slightest difference to Hilda, her experiences with Aline make a great deal. The difficulty that the dramatist had to develop Hilda's character is really evaded, with great skill, by the way in which the note of fantasy is forced after Hilda's conversation with Aline, the conversation in which she gets to "know" her. And the forcing of this note is made to seem perfectly natural by the increase in Solness' illness; so that at the end of the play we feel that both Solness and Hilda have passed into a region where we cannot apply the ordinary laws of psychology without ruining the subtle mechanism of their action. Hilda and Solness, in that last act, evolve a psychology of their own by which all that happens and all that is said seems perfectly right and natural; Ibsen in evading the difficulty, by sheer creative power, evades criticism as well.

Aline Solness is one of the most ungrateful parts that any actress can have. Ibsen has made her so unattractive that there is danger of forgetting what beautiful traits he has given her as well. Right at the beginning he indicates, with ever so delicate a touch, how much finer a nature is Aline's than her husband's. But all Aline's character is thwarted and twisted

through her sorrow, and her conscious sense of duty. She has lived alone for years with the ghosts of nine dolls, and it is no wonder that her character has narrowed; but Ibsen, except perhaps in the speech about Kaia, does not show her as hardened at all. She is genuinely glad—as glad as she can be of anything—of Hilda's influence with Solness; and while this may partly spring from her anxiety at her husband's illness it is not entirely that. It is putting a false emphasis on the play, particularly if we remember Ibsen's past work, if we do not insist that apart from the history of Solness and Hilda the dramatist wants to give some attention to this blighted life, this life which Solness has neglected and tried to ignore.

*Little Eyolf* was the first play by Ibsen that I read. I remember perfectly well how I was mainly impressed, after I had managed to lift myself out of the strange new experience of the work, by the simplicity and fascinating success of the Rat-Wife, and by the extraordinarily solemn progress of the action. I do not know any work of Ibsen's in which the mere march of events, though there is scarcely more than one actual "event" in the play, is so impressive, so majestic. I felt after reading it as if I had watched some amazingly full and vivid life, a

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life crowded with incident and excitement and suspense ; and there is nothing in it,—nothing except the death of a little boy, and the conversations of his father and mother and aunt.<sup>1</sup> In *Little Eyolf* the wonderful effect of irresistible progress is heightened by the play's distinct supernatural side. This is the first play in which Ibsen seemed to return, though with altered language, to the religion of his past ; there is a tinge of Calvinism in the talk of retribution, but it is a happier and a better religion which makes the solution of the play, when Rita decides on a life of service for others. The simple direct theme of *Little Eyolf* is hardly diverted by the sub-interest of Asta and Borgheim ; their saga only serves for Asta's confession to Alfred Allmers that she is no kin to him. Apart from this the whole force of the drama is focussed on the three who are left after Eyolf's death. Asta, though of the same nature

<sup>1</sup> There is an odd note about *Little Eyolf* in the Ibsen correspondence (English edition, p. 443) : “ In criticising *Little Eyolf* after its performance in Paris . . . Jules Lemaitre showed that he had so far misunderstood the plot as to believe that Asta Allmers was Alfred's half-sister, which would have introduced the element of incest into the play.” Asta is so far as he knows Alfred's half-sister : she is so described in the list of characters ; yet Ibsen speaks of Lemaitre “ acknowledging his mistake in a very frank and pleasant manner.” It seems almost incredible that anyone should ignore the scene in which Asta tells Allmers the truth about her birth ; but this is, presumably, what M. Lemaitre did.

as Ibsen's other helping women, has in her an independence of character greater than usual. From the first she is the most direct and real person in the play: she has little patience with Allmers' theories, when they threaten Eyolf's health, just as she has no sympathy with Rita's passions when they threaten Allmers' health. Never has Ibsen done a more skilful or more delicate piece of work than in his portrait of Rita, the woman for whom her husband is little more than an instrument of pleasure. In Rita, with her insane jealousies, her shrinking from motherhood, her absorption in physical things, Ibsen has given us a modern woman as true as Hedda. Rita has not Hedda's intellect, and so she is saved from Hedda's stupidity, for Hedda's stupid actions are essentially those of a clever woman. Rita, indeed, is the more hopeful because she is more sensual. Sins of the body are less deadly to the soul than sins of the mind; in holding that Ibsen always remained an orthodox Christian. Allmers is one of those men who, on any *a priori* grounds, seem incredible, but who are always astonishing us by existing and forcing themselves on our attention. He is the antithesis to Tesman, the successful University man who marries out of calf-love. Allmers is the solitary student, dignified, not particularly cordial, but extremely agreeable to



people he likes ; and he marries half out of mere physical passion, half because his wife has “the gold and the green forests.” So Rita, married to a husband who in his ideals is as sensual as she is, has no chance of changing her character until she meets with disaster. Then, acting on a temperament that has always been responsive, that has always, even though in a narrow range, been ready to give, disaster brings salvation, and Rita leads Allmers out of the gloom and distress that are threatening to engulf them both. It is not Ibsen’s “feminism” which makes Rita soften the sorrows of the two, it is his real knowledge of human nature ; for he knows that one who has been endowed with Rita’s physical temperament has far greater capacity for genuine feeling than has the more calculating type of materialist such as Allmers.

*John Gabriel Borkman* is really *Brand* rewritten in prose. Together with *When We Dead Awaken* it reiterates Ibsen’s thesis, the one most frequently insisted on in his theatre, that the only unpardonable sin is the sin against Love. As Brand sacrificed Agnes to religion, Borkman sacrificed Ella to business, and Rubek sacrificed Irene to art : and Ibsen will have them all condemned. I am chary of identifying a dramatist with any of his characters’ speeches—



subjective reconstruction of the great artist from his work is a perilous game, and is too often played to-day—but when we find Ibsen thus returning, in his old age, to the same motive that had engaged his prime, and in two successive plays making his chief character a man who has betrayed a woman's trust, it is legitimate to believe that the subject is one that he deemed of supreme importance, and that he agrees with the view which the dramatic character of each play invariably leaves victorious. No one indeed has doubted, so far as I know, that Ibsen did intend the final cry from the thunder in *Brand* to represent a judgment, and a right judgment on the hero's life: no one has disputed, except Mr. Shaw, that the ending of *Peer Gynt* is his attempt at a solution of the problem. What has been ignored so strangely is the fact that in the other later plays Ibsen is concerned with exactly the same problem, and insists on the same solution: while even in plays whose main subject is different, there are often minor characters through whom Ibsen presses home his conviction that Love is the only redeemer, and that the only offence is the sin against Love. In *John Gabriel Borkman* Ella Rentheim states the matter plainly. The dialogue is worth quoting :

## JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN

BORKMAN. One shrinks from risking what one holds dearest on such a voyage.

ELLA. You *had* risked what was dearest to you on that voyage. Your whole future life——

BORKMAN. Life is not always what one holds dearest.

ELLA. Was that how you felt at that time?

BORKMAN. I fancy it was.

ELLA. I was the dearest thing in the world to you?

BORKMAN. I seem to remember something of the sort.

ELLA. And yet years and years had passed since you had deserted me—and married—married another!

BORKMAN. Deserted you, you say? You must know very well that it was higher motives—well then, *other* motives that compelled me. Without *his* support I couldn't have done anything.

ELLA. So you deserted me from—higher motives.

BORKMAN. I could not get on without his help. And he made you the price of helping me.

ELLA. And you paid the price. Paid it in full—without haggling.

BORKMAN. I had no choice. I had to conquer or fall.

ELLA. Can what you tell me be true? that I was then the dearest thing in the world to you?

BORKMAN. Both then and long afterwards—long, long after.

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ELLA. But you bartered me away none the less; drove a bargain with another man for your love. Sold my love for a—for a directorship.

BORKMAN. I was driven by inexorable necessity, Ella.

ELLA. Criminal!

BORKMAN. I have heard that word before.

ELLA. Oh, do not imagine I'm thinking of anything you may have done against the law of the land. The use you made of all those vouchers and securities or whatever you call them—do you think I care a straw about that? If I could have stood at your side when the crash came——

BORKMAN. What then, Ella?

ELLA. Trust me, I should have borne it all so gladly along with you. The shame, the ruin—I would have helped you to bear it all—all!

BORKMAN. Would you have had the will—the strength?

ELLA. Both the will and the strength. For then I did not know of your great, your terrible crime.

BORKMAN. What crime? What are you speaking of?

ELLA. I am speaking of that crime for which there is no forgiveness.

BORKMAN. You must be out of your mind.

ELLA. You are a murderer. You have committed the one mortal sin.

# JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN

BORKMAN. You are raving, Ella.

ELLA. You have killed the love-life in me. Do you understand what that means? The Bible speaks of a mysterious sin for which there is no forgiveness. I have never understood what it could be ; but now I understand. The great, the unpardonable sin is to murder the love-life in a human soul.

The case is put at its extremest, of course ; but I have little doubt that it was Ibsen's conviction, that he agreed with Ella. That his mind at this period has gone back a good deal to his youth is shown, too, by his making Borkman a miner's son, indeed the very boy whose passion about the singing ore he had made into a poem. I find this motive, the guilt of the man who rejects love and kills the love-life, almost overcomes the other motive in *John Gabriel Borkman*. Powerful as the play is, Gunhild is so stern and repellent a figure that it is rather difficult to sympathize with her tragedy ; and Erhart arouses no feelings except annoyance, mingled with an admission that his life must have been rather terrible before the arrival of Mrs. Wilton. That charming adventuress is one of Ibsen's liveliest creations. She is barely on the stage ten minutes, and has very few words to speak, yet her character, her past, her late husband, her dressmaker's bill, her fortune,

her probable burial-ground are all fairly easily guessed. In painting her Ibsen employs, on a very small scale, the methods he had found so successful in painting Hedda. Mrs. Wilton is just observed, and the result, again, makes any of our modern realists seem amateurs both at characterization and at draughtsmanship.

Ella Rentheim, although in many ways she resembles other of Ibsen's "gentle" women, has, apart from her very distinct personality, a quality that marks her off. She has grown old. This is not altogether a disadvantage—I can fancy Ibsen marking this down to age when he was calculating what chances it had against youth—for Ella Rentheim, though still sweet and gentle, has learned firmness and perhaps a greater wisdom. She no longer fears Gunhild and she understands her better, and it is through this understanding that she can in the end do something to soften her sister's character; something to alleviate the tragedy that has crept into the house in the space of a few hours.

Foldal, the "Napoleonic" clerk, Foldal, who helps the great John Gabriel to go on living and hoping in return for John Gabriel's belief in his poetic impulse and power, belief in his great tragedy, is one of Ibsen's truest minor characters. His return, when he has had his foot run over by the sled in which his daughter is going

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away with Erhart and Mrs. Wilton, is one of the most pathetic scenes in drama ; its astonishing mixture of sweetness and cynicism is a feat that no other than Ibsen could accomplish with the same rigid economy of line and triumphant fullness of effect.

The chief impression of the play is that of "getting old." The burden of years, years wasted in hope, years wasted in longing, years wasted in yearning, sounds through the drama. Over every scene hangs the chill, deadly cloud that killed John Gabriel, and turned his wife and her sister into shadows.

If *When We Dead Awaken*, viewed technically, is one of the least successful of Ibsen's plays, it is also one that cannot be ignored if we would know with what message he wished his name to be associated. Irene has a good deal of Hilda Wangel in her, only with her irresponsibility has passed into actual madness. She has Hilda's way of taking not what a man says, but what he means, and of knowing what he means even in spite of himself. Rubek has used her, years before they meet in the play, as a model for a great statue of the Resurrection. She served him "in frank utter nakedness," and he ignored the woman in his passion for work ; for him it was always the "work of art first,"



then the human being. Yet Rubek's sin lay not in his being artist first, but in using his art to kill his humanity. For he really loved Irene ; he knew that her real gift to him was her " young living soul." She, like Hilda, " takes things to heart," and what drove her from Rubek was his sentence, so appalling to her in its self-control, " This has been a priceless episode for me."

It is in that sentence we have the key to the play. Ibsen has gradually worked his way to the position that no man has a right to treat love as an " episode." For most men it is. The ordinary man has his career, his life-work, his art—is Brand, or Borkman, or Rubek—and expects woman to sacrifice herself to him ; expects her consciously and deliberately to take the second place. This is what is wrong with the world, says Ibsen ; man must take love as seriously as woman does. It must be all or nothing to him. And it will not mean the abandonment of work ; men will not have to forsake their art or their business, for true love implies comradeship, and men and women, in future, are to work together.

Where *When We Dead Awaken* shows some weakening of power is in the characterization. Although his theme is still sound and certain, Ibsen gives it into the keeping of a somewhat

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unconvincing set of characters. Rubek himself, the sculptor, in much of whose past one feels the touch of autobiography, notably in his description of the impossible statue, is the best seen and best realized character. But in the third act, and in part of the second, Ibsen appears to lose his grip of the man. On Maia and Irene his grip never closed; both betray unmistakable signs of weariness. Maia is at times a perfectly shallow little worldling; at times (I suspect when Ibsen remembers that he has to put blame on Rubek) she seems to have a depth of character that belongs to someone else. Ulfheim, the hunter, is incredible and crude, and the minor figures are entirely insignificant. Yet in spite of the weakness of the play it does leave a strange impression of intense reality and truth; an impression which at times seems heightened by the almost grotesque incapacity of the characters to carry the burden of the theme. The impression is of a man who is so full of his message that he stutters in the delivering of it; for the first time in his life Ibsen felt more than he could express. That is perhaps the greatest tribute to the sincerity of his idea: that Love should be always first, that human personalities were the most important thing, that, when the great artist tries to proclaim again his old message, the weight

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breaks down even his art. In this last play Ibsen shows the truth of his message not, as before, by triumphant exposition, but by example: "art must take second place" is what he wishes us to see in the drama of *Rubek*, and for the first time art does take second place with the great dramatist, and we are left with a far keener sense of Ibsen's message than of his play.

## IX

### CONCLUSIONS

*People believe that I have changed my views in the course of time. This is a great mistake. Every development has, as a matter of fact, been altogether consistent. I myself can follow distinctly and indicate the trend of its whole course—the unity of my ideas and their gradual growth. 1881. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. 1898.*

It is difficult for us to understand how any critics were found to endanger their reputations by denying that Ibsen was a master of the drama and of the theatre. What disturbs the younger generation is that he is, perhaps, almost too skilful in his use of all the conventions and artifices of the stage and of the form which his genius did so much to improve. Sometimes, even in *The Master-Builder* or in *The Wild Duck*, we feel that Ibsen is using his astounding technical skill to force his characters into positions which they would never have occupied; while in some of his earlier dramas the machinery, beautiful and suitable as it is, may appear too ready to the hand of the personages.

A certain amount of attention has been directed lately to the "fourth wall." Mr. Shaw introduced the problem fancifully in a *jeu d'esprit* which he wrote for a charity; and since then persons with less humour have emphasized the "fourth wall" by setting a scene in which

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the fireplace is against the footlights; so that the principal character can warm his hands at the orchestra. This kind of elaborate dullness shows how great is the divorce between the revival of dramatic art, a desire for a more human theatre, and any real grasp of general principles. There is, of course, a fourth wall, but it is not between the audience and the stage; it is behind the audience. We shall have no continued and healthy revival of drama until we get back to the Greek and Oriental illusion, simpler and sincerer than ours, which renders the audience part, and a necessary part, of the stage-play. The idea of the theatre as being a place where the audience can obtain a surreptitious peep at the lives of the dramatist's characters is thoroughly unsound; a good play is not an external spectacle, it is, in an intensive form, a presentation of the possible experience of every member of the audience. The characters in a play are ourselves, and the illusion of the stage is the illusion not of a window but of a mirror. I have said that the audience is a necessary part of a stage play; of course an audience is necessary to any work of art, but it is peculiarly so to the drama. A drama that cannot be acted is a drama that cannot really be felt; it may be a good essay, or a pretty picture, but it has missed that essential quality of absorbing the self of the

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audience which is the proper note of the drama. Owing to the fact that part of a dramatist's material—his modelling clay—is human bodies and emotions and minds as actually living in actual persons, the appeal of the drama must always differ from that of the other arts, differ in this respect, that the audience must be charmed or forced or allured into a sympathy that does not differ in kind from that accorded to actual scenes of distress, of passion and of humour. It is this, I believe, which explains the puzzling predominance in England of forms of drama that are mean, or foolish or ignoble or merely frivolous. Owing to the old leaven of Puritanism the more educated and intellectual people in England lost their capacity, or their desire, to see themselves in drama. An unholy pride, the inevitable result of Puritanism, made them feel self-conscious and stupid at the sight of mummers; they had not sufficient sense of human dignity to laugh at human folly, and they had not enough faith in God's mercy to weep at human sin. They shut off from themselves these great opportunities for educating the emotions; and the result has been that a class whose emotions are either atrophied or strident has taken possession of the English theatre and forced its standards on the stage. It is hard to quarrel with so genial a critic as



Charles Lamb ; but I believe his comments on the Restoration Comedy have done more harm than any other generalization about our drama. It has become almost an axiom with people who know nothing of Congreve and Wycherley but Lamb's essay to quote airily, "They are a world of themselves almost as much as fairyland. . . . They break through no laws, or conscientious restraints. They know of none," and apply the saying to the latest Gaiety mixture of poor taste and loose morals. The argument against Lamb is a fairly obvious one ; whatever his view of the world of Congreve it is certain that the dramatist drew what he saw, that his plays, and those of his fellow-authors, are good transcripts of a very actual life. It is this which prevents me from accepting the defence of a critic who was possibly too gentle in character to realize how beastly a world that of Grammont and his like was, how tiresomely similar to ordinary unpolite debauchery was the behaviour of the gallants, male and female, that are now chiefly known through the gaiety and wit of their dramatic interpreters. To audiences sharing, however unconsciously, Lamb's views of dramatic characters, Ibsen naturally came with the force of a tremendous and unwelcome surprise. There was no possibility of dismissing the characters in *A Doll's House* as creatures of fairyland ; they

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were too obviously people in the street. Even though Torvald was not in your own stall, could you be certain that it was not Nora seated by your side? This, then, was Ibsen's greatest achievement in drama. He brought us all back—though some have yet to realize it—to the right view of dramatic life; he made his audiences part of his plays. We live in, not look at, a play by Ibsen.

Ibsen, of course, secures that result very largely by technical excellence. He often enough, for instance, reverts to the old rules of the unities, and uses them with a force and reality that make us forget, however blameably, their classical origin. Again, the sense of actuality is enhanced greatly by Ibsen's retrospective method. His amazing skill in making his characters unfold their past actions, and disclose their past lives, would alone make him the supreme dramatist of the age. The variety and unequalled success of his method, in this respect, has never perhaps been sufficiently recognized. After *A Doll's House* there is hardly a play in which the method is not used; and yet it is only after many re-readings and comparisons that the reader realizes there is a common method, so different is the use made of it in *Ghosts*, say, from that in *The Master-Builder*. The only author since Ibsen who has at times approached

his master in use of this dramatic device is Mr. Shaw : in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* we have his most successful instance of it. But Mr. Shaw never succeeds in clothing the method with the extreme naturalness which Ibsen always manages to secure. We feel that Mrs. Warren's scene with her daughter has been arranged to give her the opportunity of explaining herself and her life, and incidentally to give Mr. Shaw an occasion for giving his views of Mrs. Warren's life. In short, the preacher is greater than the artist. The only play of Ibsen in which anyone might suspect this fault is *Ghosts*, and there the situation is completely saved by the fact that Manders is a preacher, and that his diatribe against Mrs. Alving's books, which starts the great scene of retrospection, belongs rightly to an occasion that he would never have missed. Ibsen never shows his greatness so plainly as in the fact that, when we do suspect him of any tendency to didacticism, our suspicions are invariably lulled by his inventing a character to whom the delivery of this particular message shall seem entirely appropriate.

But, after all, even more helpful in conveying the impression of reality is Ibsen's observance of the unities. He was no pedant on this point. There is no play in which we find an absolute observance of the unities in the classic sense :

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but he is, in his best work, as far removed from the romantic licence common to the northern drama as from the rigid formalism that put shackles on the Latin playwright. We find, indeed, in Ibsen's work all the three great forms of literature, romantic, classic and modernist. I have in another place<sup>1</sup> tried to express the chief distinction between these three modes of art. To the classic artist form is primary; style is apt to overweigh subject: to the romantic, art knows few rules, and may break those if she keeps the law of beauty: to the modernist, art is too unconscious to be formulated; he will not have even the rule of non-subservience to rules which is the oriflamme of the romantic revolt. Now in Ibsen's historical plays his method was romantic; so also in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, though for me their romanticism of manner is so overcome by the modernism of their mood that I cannot class them with anything but the supreme works that top all schools, with *Hamlet* or *Vida es Sueño*. In *A Doll's House* we have a play almost entirely classical; it is a recounting in prose of a theme Euripides would have rejoiced in, while in *Ghosts* theme, mode and style are all Greek in their severity, their humanity and their awe. It is indeed to Greek drama, and not to French or to English, that we must

<sup>1</sup> *Samuel Rogers and his Circle*, pp. 5-7.

go to find Ibsen's true parallels : he is Hellene in his courageous choice of subjects, and Hellene in his stern, untinselled manner of dealing with them. He has neither the lubricity that we suspect in Dumas, nor the conscious righteousness that we discover in Brioux : when he writes plainly about disagreeable things he wants neither to shock the public nor to coerce the censor ; he wants to move old boundary-posts. It may be that his connection with small nationalities helped the Athenian colour of Ibsen's mind. To pass from the intense life of Norway and Denmark to the intenser life of Papal Rome ; thence to small capitals of small and artistic peoples, such as the Saxons and the Bavarians, must have done much to encourage Ibsen in his dislike of the growth of huge empires and world-wide powers. Just as an Athenian valued not size nor success, but a life shared in keen rivalry by a handful of friends and foes ; so Ibsen regretted the fall of Rome and the beginnings of United Italy. There is a great deal of cant and nonsense talked about the narrowing effects of small communities ; those who talk so take no trouble to discover or to explain the facts of modern life. If there are many people more narrow and insular and prejudiced against "foreigners" than the average Englishman, with his boast of Empire and



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Colonies and subject races, it is the German with his huge European power, and the American who has a whole continent to expand in. Finland, Scandinavia, Holland, Ireland, small countries all of them, excel in the production of people who are in the forefront of politics, art and letters. The modern member of a large empire is in great risk of making the same mistake as did the Roman of imperial days; he mistakes size for importance. The danger is even greater, for he will be content to rest in his littleness, believing by mere adhesion to an empire containing so many square miles he is superior to the man whose native country can be measured in acres, who has no possessions beyond the seas. It is not, then, too paradoxical to suggest that it was easier for Ibsen, the son of a small nation, to see the value of intensity in drama; and it was seeing this that led him, however unconsciously, to abandon the romantic for the classic formula, and finally both for the modernist.<sup>1</sup>

Modernism is not this or the last century's discovery. All great art has something of it:

<sup>1</sup> Objection has been made to the term "modernist." I cannot say that it is satisfactory, but Mr. Symons used it many years ago in discussing the verse of Henley; and it has since then been extended from things literary to music, theology and philosophy. I can think of nothing to take its place, as realism, which would be best, has, in the popular mind, been associated with the movement that is more properly called naturalism or actualism.



for it is that in art which forces the artist to remember that art is a part of life, of ordinary life. It must not be confounded with naturalism, that quite arbitrarily rejected one set of symbols for another; for instance in the case of Huysmans, who insisted upon the beauty of decaying matter as against the beauty of life. It is rather a belief that there is no need for the artist, when he desires to secure a beautiful result, to manipulate life in such a way that the spectator or reader should be conscious, either pleasantly or otherwise, that what he is witnessing is something exceptional. In painting Rembrandt is the supreme Modernist as against Raphael who veiled the faults of the classical tradition with the glamour of the romantic renaissance. Again the difference between Rembrandt and let us say Frith or Rops—both servants of Satan in their degree—is that Rembrandt asks us to see the beauty *in* commonplace or ugly things: Frith and Rops ask us to love the beauty *of* commonplace or ugly things. In theology Rembrandt would be orthodox, a believer in divine immanence: Frith and Rops are in essence pantheists: and pantheism is the death of all art, as it is the denial of all personality. Modernism is, then, the foe of exclusion, though it is the friend of selection; it proceeds by way of synthesis rather than analysis, and can claim for

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art a larger kingdom than was ruled by the classic or the romantic sceptre. It is here that we find so close a connection between art and life. The classical artist will be concerned with form, and the romantic with an aspect of life, seen in terms of art; but the modernist's primary concern is not with art at all, or not at least with art in the narrower sense. He will never be tempted to regard humanity in the mass as of less importance than learning or culture; he will always, if he be a creative artist, have more interest in the semi-independent lives of his characters than in the fact of their original dependence on him. The creative artist has been compared by a modern thinker to a man smoking; he has absolute control over the smoke until he has allowed it to issue from his lips. From that moment the shapes the smoke may take can only in part be decided by his wishes; other circumstances and other influences converge upon that for which he is originally responsible. So the creative artist makes his characters, sends them out into the gusty world of dramatic incident and adventure, and does not, if he be a sure and great artist, allow himself to keep too close a control over their development. He respects the rights of his material; that is why Dickens must remain far greater than Wilkie Collins, and Poe the

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superior to Gaboriau, while Hawthorne is the superior of Poe. We rightly resent the action of an artist who too evidently controls, to suit either his prejudices or his hopes, the characters he has charmed us by discovering. If Ibsen had allowed Nora to relent towards Torvald we should have been defrauded ; it would have been the betrayal of his great trust to let Nora rest satisfied with a lower spiritual ideal than that which is signalled by the ominous slamming of the door. Ibsen, though he is not the first Modernist in imaginative literature, is the greatest. Euripides had the difficulty of a traditional material from which it was dangerous to depart. Chaucer, who comes closest of all modern authors to the ideal of Greek sanity and fearlessness, had not the depth of character or the unerring insight into the deeper problems of human nature that Ibsen has. Bunyan fails owing to his preoccupation with a very one-sided theology, and Richardson is the victim of an environment full, to another age, of shallow ideals and false standards of honour and virtue. It would be foolish to say that Ibsen does not betray his period ; he does, but he is, largely owing to his political prejudices, singularly free from the worst cant of his day. In consequence of this freedom we have in the later dramas the completest example of the modernist spirit

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in literature. After *Ghosts* there is no play, unless we except *Hedda Gabler*, in which the art seems more important than the life, the machinery more vital than the idea : each of the later dramas, particularly *The Wild Duck*, *The Master-Builder*, and *The Lady from the Sea*, is full of that spirit of truthfulness to character which makes Ibsen's work so refreshing to an age surfeited with poems and imaginative fictions that betray only the author's views. It is this quality, doubtless, which has made some of Ibsen's later work either unintelligible or unwelcome to those who previously called themselves Ibsenites. The freedom that he allows his characters is not easily understood by lesser artists, who are for ever forcing the creatures of their discovery into shapes that suit their preconceived notions of propriety. In Ibsen's work there is that quality of magic, of ecstasy which marks the supreme artist : he evokes souls by his art, and his evocation produces independent spirits who show us not the author's ideas but the idea of life, illustrate the purpose and meaning of humanity. We must not exaggerate, however, this independence : we must remember that the origin, the artistic origin at least, of the characters in the plays is Henrik Ibsen, and that their temperaments, in exhibiting humanity, do so through the temperament of

their originator, however subdued his individuality may be.

The colour of Ibsen's ideas is chiefly shown in his plays by two ever-recurring factors, one conscious, the other, it would seem, unconscious to the author, at least in his early manhood. The conscious factor is his insistence on love as the one explaining, redeeming and atoning power in the world; the unconscious is the superiority of women. There is no doubt that to a society which is still acutely bi-sexual, that is, a society which bases on a physical distinction a whole army of emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual distinctions, quite ignoring the actual facts of the occurrence of so-called "feminine" characteristics in men and so-called "masculine" characteristics in women—the superiority given to woman in Ibsen's theatre is a distinct blot on his work. It is unfortunate that nearly always decency, truth, love, reason, enthusiasm, energy should belong to his women, while the men stand for shiftlessness, cowardice, stupidity, rascality, greed and selfishness: the only considerable exceptions are Stockmann and Dr. Wangel among the men, and Hedda Gabler among the women. No doubt there were special circumstances that forced Ibsen into this unfortunate loading of one sex with all the virtues of strength, honour and unselfishness; the curious



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thing is that he was not, in any sense, a feminist. He did not keenly support any woman's movement, and he seems to have been annoyed, even surprised, that after *A Doll's House* he was regarded as the woman's dramatist. That is why I have called this very considerable factor in his work unconscious. I am sure he did not deliberately set out to belittle one sex at the expense of the other. How then did this very marked characteristic occur? I believe it sprang from Ibsen's confirmed individualism. He was ever concerned with the problem of the fight of the individual against the state. Now that is a problem which does not exist for the ordinary man. The ordinary man whom Ibsen knew, the business man, the self-conscious Bohemian, the small politician, regards such machinery of the state as he meets as perfectly natural and inevitable. For the banker the police force is an extension of his business, like his ledger and his safes; for the politician, the vestries and the local councils are aids to his personal life. Ibsen felt all these state-institutions as the foes of individual liberty and progress; but he knew he was exceptional in this; he knew no other man felt that a policeman was a horrible evil and a cabinet a cancer eating away the life of freedom. To find men who are as individualist as Ibsen was you must go to the poor or to the



criminal. Ibsen was too great an artist to be satisfied with inventing types to suit his theories, and he knew nothing of the poor ; so he could not write as, since his day, Brieux and Mr. Galsworthy have written. Then, quite by accident, he discovered woman : not essential woman, though he knew her as poets alone know, but the woman who has been created by the accidents and design of national and social circumstances. Women, he saw, had almost exactly his feeling about institutions ; they hate generalizations ; they are logical, personal, real ; do not get lost in a vapid controversy about conventional standards : and so we have that astonishing gallery of individualists, from Nora to Maia. It is not of course in every play that social or political interests are involved ; but when they are, the woman invariably and naturally is found on the side of truth and against that expediency which is the cement of great communities. Bornick stands for the prosperity of his town and the reputation of its leaders : Lona can only say "Bornick must not lie." Torvald stands for the sanctity of marriage, the duties of motherhood and the hushing-up of scandal : Nora only knows that she cannot continue to live a life that she knows is that of a prostitute. Pastor Manders upholds family honour and conjugal fidelity : Mrs. Alving cries

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against him that her son is a dying lunatic because she lived with his father. Gregers Werle proclaims the ideal, will inaugurate the reign of Truth and Beauty: Gina can say nothing, but knows that her life with Hialmar is the best thing for both of them. Rosmer struggles, rather feebly, to regenerate his fellow-countrymen: Rebekka saves her soul through a love that Rosmer is too cowardly to accept. Solness wastes his life in an envious attempt to suppress the younger generation: Hilda dances back into his life, reminding him that once he had dreamed for her. Allmers is driven by duty from study to the care of his offspring; Rita emerges from her sensual circle of desires into the passion for personal service. Borkman is devoured by huge commercial ambitions: Ella Rentheim remembers nothing but that he killed her love-life. And Irene, in *When We Dead Awaken*, convinces Rubek that not even art has the right to use love instead of enjoying it. Thus in the great majority of the dramas we find the women upholding the personal, individual values of things, refusing to be blinded by the ethical and social dust that their men keep flinging in their eyes. It is not fair to conclude from all this that Ibsen deliberately believed in a kind of rule-of-thumb anarchy; that he refused to make any rules for any cases.

Those who have drawn this conclusion—Mr. Bernard Shaw is the chief offender—have forgotten that Ibsen is primarily an artist, and specifically a dramatic artist. For the dramatist no situation is more effective than the clash between public and private interests; it is this which Ibsen presents. He is not an opponent of rule; he is interested in the exceptions of life. I admit that his anti-state bias does make him bear rather too heavily on the individualist side: but in doing this he is providing a very useful corrective to the thought of an age which has been almost oppressively social and generalizing. He recalled, however unconsciously, to an age which was essentially un-Christian and determinist the plain rules of Christian civilization. Now and then he poses a world, too ready with verdict and sentence, with the old challenge “Let him that is without sin among you, cast the first stone at her.” After all the only safe general rules are positive, rules of love and good-feeling and brotherhood. When you have a case to judge you must not apply, with a casual carelessness, some general condemnatory law; you must scrupulously and with kindness take each case on its merits. All the legal and ecclesiastical and social devices for saving people from thinking, these are what Ibsen detested, and this detestation of his was singularly sound

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and clear-headed. After he had swept away the conventional devices, for many people, by *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, his followers exalted his bold surgery into a similar device ; pressed, as stupid people will, unconventionality into the service of the world, and made a fetish out of a superficial freedom : and soundly Ibsen chastised them for their mistake in *The Wild Duck*. It is curious how like he is in his manner of thought to Dr. Johnson : "Clear your mind of cant," would do well as the gist of Ibsen's message to his generation.

We may admit that it is a pity that Ibsen's preoccupation with anti-state theories forced him to concentrate on women rather than on men ; we must almost admit that great advantages have sprung from this concentration. Whether he liked it or not, there is no doubt that Ibsen is the poet and the dramatist of the Modern Woman. I am not using that expression to denote any strange creature of the schools or the laboratories, who followed learning and despised life : I doubt if she ever existed outside the pages of a few anti-feminist writers ; unless indeed as the modern counterpart of that old phenomenon, the bachelor—by nature or circumstance. The modern woman, as Ibsen saw her, differs from the old only in being more human, more real

and more true. And she owes that increase in reality to her insistence on individuality: she does not despise love or motherhood, but insists that these, and all other splendid things, shall have their spiritual meaning and be personally and freely apprehended. Ibsen believed, as Plato did, that nothing can be so powerful an engine for truth and rightness as Love; that it should always be the supreme consideration in life; that no one has any excuse for disobeying its commands, if they are understood. Critics incurably romantic in grain, like Mr. Shaw and Mr. Archer, have tried to evade this deliberate and passionate belief of Ibsen's; they have—Mr. Shaw has shown it again and again in his later books—confused Love with that silly romantic attraction which in the young is sexual and in the old sentimental. The source of this confusion rests of course in the old idea of woman, an idea from which Mr. Shaw has never freed himself, as a creature mainly, if not entirely, sexual and sensual. Of course if you start with an idea of Love which makes it consist in sexual relationship between two people whose knowledge of each other is mainly confined to that sort of intercourse, it is not surprising that you should try to relieve Ibsen from the suspicion of having made anything so narrow the basis of all personal life. What I cannot understand



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is why anyone should have credited a poet of Ibsen's genius with this Mohammedan theory ; why credit him with Torvald's view of love rather than with Nora's ? The mistake is a curious evidence of how a bad tradition will impose itself among people whom one may expect to be emancipated.

You will find men and women who, in spite of their professions, talk as though Love were something to be ordered or countermanded at will. Friendship, they say, is good ; but take care that it does not spoil your chance of the best thing in life. They speak of Love as something separate, opposed, inimical to life's other happinesses and beauties ; they make it a thing selfish and lonely and aloof. They will prepare the ground for it, and build up a house, and guard the door, and warm the rooms ; and Love does not pause at the threshold of the great empty palace, but flies lightly into a happy crowded attic in some teeming tenement. They would still make Love depend on ignorances and shynesses and false shames and falser candours ; they have put away, with apparent gladness, the old convention that men and women are different animals, but they still hug the paraphernalia of an ancient custom. All the business of Love's comedy—the titter and the question and the masked knowledge may be distasteful and absurd ; but



they still hanker after the glamour of love, and wait eagerly from their pillows for the glimmer of the false dawn. Love for them is still that Aphrodite who was born, not of Uranus, but of Zeus and Dione, still the goddess who can be trapped in a net for the laughter of Olympus; not the fearless goddess who comes when she wills, and would not have us over-anxious.

Now it is evident that all these poor, nervous, neurotic ideas about sexual love are the result of a convention that treats woman as something less or more than human, something essentially different from man. That the lover may treat his beloved as goddess or brute is true; but that illusion which makes the object of love something non-human is as common among women as among men. It is only men, and a few women at some periods of their life, who have ever insisted on regarding woman as a kind of natural function, with affinities reaching to hell and heaven, and yet condescending to visit earth. Of course there have always been exceptions: men and women have been friends since the days of Pericles and Aspasia—but we would like to know what his wife thought of Pericles, and even more what he thought of her. Still, exceptions apart, there lives enough conscious and unconscious contempt of women as

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individuals for Ibsen gradually to make their claim the chief subject of his dramas. And he chose to do this along the most difficult lines. He did not give us dramas in which some great exceptional woman, some Joan of Arc, or Elizabeth, or Theresa, or Florence Nightingale, achieved huge success in great work. He preferred to oppose the older type of woman, whether actually presented as in Mrs. Borkman or the early Nora, or defended as by Pastor Manders, with the newer type, and show that even in woman's own business, in loving and companioning men, the new woman had the superiority. He opposes with all his vigour the idea that sexual love is something so exclusive that it had better be the only relationship between a husband and wife; and he opposes it by showing how infinitely more true is the affection which includes comradeship, companionship and real intimacy. He never makes the stupid mistake, so often slipped into by doctrinaires and prigs, that sexual love is not different from and superior to all else. He knew that, as all poets do. But he knew also that the difference is one you cannot define or analyse or capture; that it is one Love makes for himself, and is not in the least dependent on any particular form of relationship. It is a mystical difference which no man can secure;

it evades all search, and is not to be persuaded by tears, or entangled by laughter. What Ibsen knew is that to people who are really in love, all the other forms of companionship were made more beautiful and more real. There should be no risk of anyone attacking Ibsen as attempting to exalt physical attraction, or merely vague sentiment into this supreme position: he is as free from that fallacy as is Plato. In the tragedy of Nora and her husband, of Rita and Allmers, of Rebekka and Rosmer he has given us various pictures of the disastrous effects of physical attraction pursued as an end, or used as a cloak to mask ignorance and lack of sensitive feeling. While in *Love's Comedy*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *The Master-Builder* he shows himself the foe of that sentimental vapidness which is one of the worst growths of a prudish civilization. Love for Ibsen is a purifying, atoning and strengthening force. It is something which happens, like birth or death; something which is within our desires, but beyond our orders, a true inspiration which no one deserves and anyone may have.

Of course this philosophy is not explicit in Ibsen; he would not be a great dramatist if it were. But there are few plays of which it is not the background. It, and nothing less, is the key to his insistence, so characteristic and eager,

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on the need for reality in personal relationships. Nothing was more typical of his age than chatter about duty. Under the stress of Kantian philosophy with its emphasis on the categorical imperative, duty had been promoted to a quite unjustified place in practical ethics. It became, in popular use, an excuse for shirking both thought and action. Manders, appealed to by a woman in despair, points her to her duty to her husband, to society, to ideals; reminds her of everything in fact save Love and Truth. And Manders represented the clerical temper of his time, which differed not greatly from that which haled the woman taken in adultery before Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup> Ibsen says in effect "you have no duty when you have no love"; fools took this at the time to mean that a man and his wife need have no love for each other, distorting the obvious meaning of such a play as *A Doll's House*. All Ibsen insists on is the grave danger of any relationship that is not free and truthful

<sup>1</sup> It is a little curious that some critics of Ibsen, who are strenuous upholders of Christianity, have failed to see how in his rigid resolution to show that laws have their exceptions, he is following, possibly unconsciously, one of the most distinctive features of Our Lord's teaching. In His refusal to apply the Mosaic law of adultery, the Rabbinic law of the Sabbath, the Pharisaic law of cleansing, we have very noticeable examples of that objection to generalization and convention which has been denounced as feminist, but which many of us prefer to think of as Christian.

and personal : for without the three elements of truth and freedom and personal understanding any real love is impossible, and without that life is hardly worth the living.

This, then, is the key to Ibsen. He does not assert that there is no golden rule. What he asserts is that you must be sure that your rule is golden ; and that the only touchstone is truth. I admit that this may sound a little commonplace as the message of an author who has been regarded as definitely eccentric and schismatic. The fact is that no author of the nineteenth century except Browning is definitely of the centre, so directly in contact with that great philosophy that had its source in Plato, and flows through the Alexandrine theologians, and has had so many defenders and exponents in mystics all over the world. In Ibsen we have not, it is true, got that gaiety and light-hearted sureness which is the note of the Catholic mystic ; but we have as truly as in any of that great company a belief in correspondence, a belief in the final reality and an unconquerable trust in the overwhelming might of Love. His cynicism has nothing of the atrocious laughter of France ; his moods of depression have nothing of the heavy ugliness of Prussia ; his anger nothing of the hideous plainness of Belgium. He is as free as Browning from sentimentality, and as



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tender as Tolstoy to the weakness that springs from others' wickedness. He was more fearless than any author of his time in writing what he had felt, careless of criticism, heedless of insults, ignoring false interpreters; and the new century, to which the Ibsen of the old controversies seems, though wrongly, rather old-fashioned and unwanted, may find new material for thought and discussion in Ibsen the poet and the mystic.

*Mais, à vrai dire, tout est idée, tout est symbole.*

*Ainsi, les formes et les attitudes d'un être humain révèlent nécessairement les émotions de son âme. Le corps exprime toujours l'esprit dont il est enveloppe. Et pour qui sait voir, la nudité offrira la signification la plus riche.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Regarder les chefs-d'œuvre de l'art. Toute leur beauté vient de la pensée, de l'intention que leurs auteurs ont cru diviner dans l'Univers.*

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